ANTS

and other stories

Gopinath M[illegible]

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GOPINATH MOHANTY

Translated from Oriya by

SITAKANT MAHAPATRA



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about the author

Born in 1914 in the village Nagabali, 7 miles from Cuttack, Gopinath Mohanty did his M.A. in English literature and joined the Orissa Administrative Service. Author of 24 novels, 8 volumes of short stories, a play and a collection of critical articles, Mohanty is one of the foremost fiction writers in India today, well-known for his love of life and the common man and his rich and powerful folk-idiom. His novel *Amrutur Santan* (Children of Immortality) was the first Oriya book to get the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1955. In 1974 his epic novel *Mati Matala* got the Jnanpith Award. Mohanty lives and writes at Bhubaneswar after his retirement from Government service. The citation of the Jnanpith Award describes him as powerful novelist blending idealism with realism : "The landscape of Gopinath Mohanty's fiction is largely peopled by the down-trodden Harijan and the mute tribal, the exploited peasant and the town-bred white-collar worker, ever desicated in the struggle for survival. He unmasks the many faces of oppression and tyranny, but without recourse to strident slogans or appeal to class war. In the gloom of suffering though knee-deep in mud, man has his gaze yet fixed on the stars. In Mohanty's hands the social is lifted to the level of the metaphysical. He would nurture and connect, rather than tear up or reject."

about the translator

Sitakant Mahapatra (b. 1937) educated in Utkal, Allahabad and Cambridge Universities ; left university teaching to join IAS ; the youngest ever to recieve the Central Sahitya Akademy Award, Orissa Sahitya Akademy Award, Visuva Milan Poetry Award and 'International Who's Who in Poetry' Award ; member, Central Sahitya Akademy and Bharatiya Jnanpith.

INTRODUCTION

Translation of creative literature is always difficult and the risk of presenting mere abstract counters of literal meanings rather than the rich, colourful and intricate patterns of the auditory and visual landscape of the original is always there. Besides, some authors are more susceptible to translation than others. Translation is not an exercise in finding equivalent meanings for words ; it is creating a parallel symbolic milieu in the language into which a work is translated. The more colloquial and down-to-earth the idiom of the original work, the greater is the problem of finding its exact symbolic counterparts.

The difficulty in translating Gopinath Mohanty is precisely this : his language partakes of the complex idiom and colloquial structure of the Oriya language. The words invoke myraid pictures and sounds of Orissa's rural landscape. Sometimes it is difficult to render them into literal English without sounding ridiculous or even banal. What, for example, would be the meaning of an expression "Sarabu played a five mile long *ragini* in his three feet long flute" ? The original Oriya however evokes the wistful music of the flute in the lonely hills and valleys of tribal Orissa and its distant lingering note floating on the silent landscape of the hills and jungles. The nine stories included in this small anthology reflect the main concern of Mr. Mohanty's works : an awareness of human destiny and a quality of deep

love and commitment to man. It was Rene Char who said, "obsession with the harvest and indifference to history are the two strings of my bow". Gopinath Mohanty's obsession is equally with the harvest, the here and the now, the day to day drabness of our existence. Gumpha Swamy and his friend are therefore the heroes of our times in the manner of Lermontov's and their momentary sliding back into history is ended by the intervention of the realistic lady of the house who has scant regard for history and its movements and who has an eye on the present and its grandeur and tragedy. The inherent tragedy of the human situation is equally poignantly brought out in *Somersalt*. And who has not gone through the search for a house where one can belong ? The Civil Supplies Officer in *Ants* goes out on a determined bid to check smuggling across the borders, but then confronted with the scene of hunger and privation he is no longer able to see the crime and believe in the validity of the social laws. It is this intense humanism and commitment to life that infuses Mr. Mohanty's work with the quality of greatness. The social is lifted up to the level of the metaphysical ; the external landscape of a drunkard ordering the closure of the roads finds a parallel in puranic lore. Sometimes it is the internal landscape that is painted as in *Drowning*. Taken together these nine stories reflect a deep humanistic concern with our destiny in the context of the tragic human situation, the indifference, the physical world and of history and the ineluctable jest for living.

Sitakant Mahapatra

CONTENTS

Ants

Slowly they moved up, the two tired feet, one after the other. The muscles of the leg tore apart, something hammered inside the chest furiously. Sweat-drops hung from the rim of the hat as rain-drops from the eaves. The shorts and the shirt were dripping wet and yet the body moved, as if leaning on the wind ! Presently it was the top of the hill. Ramesh paused.

Far far below, the forest of tall trees looked dense-dark. The forest seemed to climb down the stairs of the valley to the nether region ! But up there, the bald floor of the hill glittered in the sun, grass-rimmed, with the blue sky all around.

It was no joke climbing hills, Ramesh told himself. But how could a young officer say that to the older people accompanying him ! So he brushed away his pain, almost by an act of will, and with teeth pressed against the lower lip joked to them, 'What ! Tired out with this much only !' And then his lean wiry figure scuttled across pointed, rough stones.

His *chaprasi* Binu came up, sighing like an engine ; his huge turban slowly rising like an earth-coloured mushroom. Dark and stockily built, gold rings in nose and ears, a flask and a gun slung round the neck : that was Binu. He came up and stood behind Ramesh as a signboard.

Waves of a choral song's refrain came up from down below: *baile, baile*. One, then a second, then another. Eight figures slowly emerged from behind the tall grass. Kondhs in loin-clothes, with baskets carried at the two ends of poles balanced on the shoulder. The song ended. Binu shouted, 'Lazy bones, how-so-much you chide them they will always trail behind.'

'We have become rather old,' somebody retorted ; and then they broke into peals of laughter and sat a little apart lighting their home-made cigars.

Binu served tea from the flask. And sipping tea under that *amla* tree Ramesh asked, 'Did you come this way before, Binu?'

'Yes, Sir, last time two years ago ; many times before that.'

'Did any other officer walk up this way ?'

'So many, Sir. This is after all on the road to the market.'

Ramesh felt somewhat depressed. Ever since childhood his greatest passion and pleasure lay in a feeling of superiority, of being ahead of all. That was indeed a long and chequered story of success ! That insignificant, rustic poor boy from a village in North Balasore gradually growing up to his present status ; from the school to the college, friends losing out in life's cruel race, falling behind, seen no more ; scholarships, medals, prizes, memories of success. Then the job, unknown people coming to be introduced, the *chaprasi*'s salute, the supplication of the Insurance Agent and the inevitable marriage proposals. The world cared for him, saluted him. Those early successes in life's struggles, self-importance gradually maturing into self-confidence, making him feel he was somebody. Those innumerable others around him were of no significance except as providing a backdrop for his glowing self.

But that uneasy persistent feeling at every step ! People had been before him, there were foot-prints ahead on the road and in comparison he was so small. At least while climbing the hill he could work himself up to some happiness for was he not the first man from civilization walking up that way ? But now even that imagined pleasure was slipping away. And Binu was describing vividly the *Burra Sahib*'s five-day camp on this hill-top,

the hunting, the merry-making and the dances that had transformed it to a city !

That was merely another time. Men had come and gone away ; only the forest looked dark as ever. Binu reminisced : 'No more the dense forests of those days, wild animals prowling everywhere. The Kondhs have cleaned up everything. Here itself were Kondh villages; when the forests vanished the tigers rampaged in the villages and the villagers had to move away.'

'These days there are no forests ? Then what are these ?'

'Yes, the chopped-off trees also grow again and make a forest. But those forests !'

Ramesh thought of the endless stream of men roaming the forest; penetrating, recoiling and coming back again, the thin hill-stream of their happiness and pain that never died and even now murmured as it rushed down the pebble-bed.

He felt a sudden burst of anguish that dulled his acute awareness of separate self and merged it into that eternal stream.

A thin line of ants had already formed around the broken bits of biscuits. Ramesh was startled and smiled to himself : 'Here too the ants !' They reminded him of the hidden subterranean roots of his visit to the hills.

He asked Binu, 'You think we can catch the rice-smugglers?' 'Most certainly, Sir. Whichever way it goes the smuggled rice has to appear in Kaspawalsa market. It is only 10 a.m. now and climbing down that valley we will be at the market before two. And then, where can they escape ? We will catch them all.' 'Fine, let us then move without any more delay.'

Binu was vexed at the prospect of no rest, even up here.

And he shouted at the Kondhs, directing them to move. The Kondhs also muttered their dissatisfaction. No rest, only run and run fast. In their strange primitive language they showered abuse on Binu and his forefathers. These fellows, they thought, knew only how to order bring water, fetch fuel-wood, carry luggages. And they learnt only a few words of command. No harm abusing them soundly ! And the Kondhs talked among themselves what fools these fellows must be trying to catch people for selling rice across a border. Hunger was universal and whoever wanted rice had a right to purchase it wherever he could. Whatever could be the crime in that ? And who after all produced the rice ? Or could it be that these people had separate laws of justice ; laws under which it was a crime to distil liquor, to chop off forest trees, to purchase rice, to sit down when tired after a long day's trek carrying heavy luggages ? But there was no time to talk further. The *chaprasi* had started abusing, the officer had started walking fast. The Kondhs got up. All their complaints joined up to a song with a refrain.

The dense forest lay ahead. Down the valley the road opened up as a tunnel. Their song in chorus pleased Ramesh. How soothing it sounded ! What did it mean ? May be some community legend.

'Binu', Ramesh roared.

Binu ran up to him full of bitterness and abuse inside. At fifty-five, *sans* six teeth, the bald patch ever growing on the head, the body wanted leisurely pace, quiet and ease. But this young officer would hurry up everybody, run as mad himself and drive others mad. Binu had enough to live on and could easily do without the job. But minus the power it

gave him, would he not be shorn of his magic, reduced to only another person among those numerous insignificant others on whom he had fed all his life ? And it was this fear of losing the powers of the mysterious magic, the terrible charm that drove Binu up the hill.

'Binu, how nicely these folks sing,' Ramesh said.

'Very nice indeed, Sir.'

'But what does it mean ?'

Tossing his *pugree* from side to side and giving another twist to the betel inside his mouth Binu explained as a wise man, 'Of course, it is that song of the Chaitra festival.'

'But what does it mean ?'

'That same old story of *Dhangdas* and *Dhangdis** and their love for each other'

'Do they always sing this song ?'

'Always, Sir !'

'But does *baile* mean jasmine ?'

'You have got it right, Sir. At this rate, you will be a master of their language in no time.'

Ramesh was pleased with this answer and asked, 'Do they sing songs even in ripe old age ?' 'In this country of ours none ever grows old, Sir.' Ramesh took mental note. *Baile* is jasmine and the Kondhs only sing of love.

Binu felt happy at having befooled Ramesh.

And the Kondh labourers continued their trek singing their tale of woe, the unending story of misfortunes ; all the while heaping abuses on the officer and his wretched *chaprasi.*

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* Unmarried Advasi boy and girls respectively.

Groups of Kondhs met them along the road, laughed, exchanged jokes, joined the music and partook of the same cruel destiny of pain. They could so easily share the mocking spirit of the songs ! When there was a lull in the singing Binu shouted at them and asked them to continue. 'None grows old in our country' Binu's own words took a new shape and meaning for himself. He thought of his youngest wife, his third whom he had snatched away from many eager hopes, by paying extra 'bride-price' to her parents. In this land of forests superiority consisted in snatching away things and in that man excelled animals at times. But Binu's trickery concealed the frustrations of a life-time. He had orchards, lands, houses, cattle—everything but a child of his own. With growing years he felt this vacuum more and more. He remembered his youngest wife and became anxious as to how his two elder wives would be treating her. In this country, if a woman did not feel happy with her husband she just left. Binu started worrying whether his youngest wife was happy with him. And then he remembered that young *chaprasi* Bisi, a distant grandson who often came to his house to crack jokes at his grandma !

'Binu.'

'Yes, Sir.'

'How is it that this smuggled rice is not detected any earlier? For smuggling to Madras they must be stacking the rice somewhere and the businessmen must be carrying stock from there. But though we have by now trekked four days from Koraput, nowhere we saw any such thing.'

'It could be detected only if it moved in bulk, Sir.' Saying this in disgust Binu remembered how he himself had been able

to smuggle out a hundred maunds of rice at exorbitant rates. He believed that in a society which left everybody to fend for himself, pulling others' legs, trying to cheat others and thrive at their expense was only natural and right. Breaking rules for one's own selfish ends and fear lest one is caught were natural corollaries of such a selfish system, he thought. He tried to twist the direction of the conversation.

'Not much rice is being smuggled away by isolated individuals. At the market, Sir, you will see only small buyers from the plains down below, with ten kgs., twenty kgs. of purchases. Only a few miles away is the Madras border and there the businessmen would be waiting with bullock carts, hessian bags and pots of money. Then cartloads of rice would move to Vizagapatnam, Parbatipur and other places. Businessmen, after all, know the secrets of the trade, Sir.'

Ramesh became serious. 'We have to catch the stock of rice before it reaches the traders.'

His eyes shone with the strange, fierce light of a hunter's eyes. A single theme was haunting him. Why should others steal away our rice ? He felt it was an interference in his personal rights that must be resisted.

While speaking of 'our rice', his consciousness pictured one thing only : he was an Oriya, behind him lay the history of Orissa, the story of wars, empires and expansion at the cost of others. From the dust-heap and broken bricks of the past his mind returned to the degeneration of the present and sought to put the blame for this on the neighbouring states.

Fellows have already eaten up this country and made it all hollow. What now again ? He asked himself. He remembered

the prey down the forest roads. His mind got intoxicated with the prospect of hunting down the rice smugglers. 'If only I catch them,' he clenched his teeth.

But he did not know what he would do if he caught them. He hurried down the slope of the hill.

It was late winter and the heat of the walk gave the feeling of spring. Trees were full of foliage and flowers. At the end of the slope was a small village. Mango groves, fields, threshing grounds, rows of houses. Along the road stood a small boy and seeing unknown persons, he cried for his mother and ran away. That was only the beginning. The calves tethered on the roadside strained at the ropes and started mooing. The womenfolk withdrew inside and stared with big blank eyes. One by one the villagers came near. Ramesh felt it was a known picture. His feet started dragging. He stood in the shade of a spreading tree and looked back. The hill stood behind him as a monstrous ghost of the imagination. Binu was coming down slowly panting and the Kondhs behind him almost running.

'Can we get some drinking water here, Binu,' he asked.

'Of course, Sir.' Binu was all attention. He opened the luggage pack and ran into the village with a glass and a *lota*. The Kondhs sat down for a little rest. Ramesh waited. In no time a *charpoy* was produced, somebody stood with a *lota* of hot milk. Another with a bunch of ripe bananas and a mixed drone of Oriya and Telugu entreated him, 'It is already too late, Sir, and the sun has climbed almost to the top of the sky. The villagers would feel most unhappy, Sir, if you do not pause here for some food and rest.'

Rest ! Ramesh laughed to himself. That self-same invitation all along the way. As if walked-in by forests and hills men only wanted to lean on one another. Pause here for a while, stay in our village for the night. Shadows of known trees, the slow, trailing smoke on half-recognised thatched roofs, men and women engaged in the familiar rituals of daily living. Men in forests, on the hills, everywhere the known world of men.

And yet, he had to move. That affectionate welcome of the village left behind would persist as a sweet smell for a while and then drift away in the indifferent wind.

Binu returned with some water. Ramesh drank it off and said, 'Let us now move.' Suddenly an old woman appeared and stood in his way. A smile lighting up her time-worn face, she said, 'At this late hour, my dear son, how can you go without some food ? Would your mother have left you like this ? Don't you have mothers and sisters in this village ?'

Everybody smiled. The old woman was of the Kondh-Dora caste, an admixture of Kondhs and Telugus.

Suddenly Ramesh felt heaps of cool shade piling on his sunburnt eyes. But he said loudly, almost trying to persuade himself, 'No, no, we have to move. There is so much to do.' He dragged himself away. The shadow of that old woman's mother-face remained transfixed in his memory. Like all mothers' eyes, her eyes looked deep inside and an eternal 'alas' floated on her lips. She had no caste, no language. She was mother. The job on hand was forgotten for a while. But it came back again when he saw people on way to the market with headloads of rice.

'Binu, how far is the market now ?'

'Just a little ahead, Sir. We have almost reached.'

'Take care, no shouting, no noise any longer.' Binu cautioned the Kondhs not to sing any more and walk silently. It was now a silent, cautious march like hunters in a forest. Deep silence reigned outside but there was so much noise raging inside. Ramesh raced hurriedly in his mind over the projected action. He would not merely stop the smuggling for a day ; he would suggest a permanent cure for this evil in his report to the Government. That would bring him commendation, recognition and hasten his pace up the ladder of progress. It was like winning a prize or a special credit in the examination. He felt he richly deserved it. For was he not like Livingstone in Black Africa trying to locate the original source of illegal smuggling across the border ? He felt overwhelmed with his own efficient and skilful handling of the matter.

tle ahead, on the road-side, a family was having the day's food in the shade of a tree. A small child twitching its wiry hands and feet violently lay on the ground, with its face to the sky. The blue sky was rent by its sharp cry. The shrivelled figure of a young woman in rags, hair all dishevelled, left her leaf-plate of food and without even washing her hands, pulled away the torn rags covering her breasts and hurriedly put them to the child's mouth. The dried-up breasts dangled like rags. With the child clutched in her arms the young mother kept staring at the strangers. As though she was no person, but only some dishevelled hair and two indifferent distant eyes ! There was no eagerness for any news, no care for anybody's eminence in those eyes. The world outside hardly existed. Seeming to look out on the world outside, it really looked deep down in

the flesh, to the dregs of the life-force where ultimate hunger pained, ultimate love covered bird-like offsprings under its protective wings. Three others were also eating rice : an old man, an old woman and the husband of the young woman. Only bones and skin, caves of eyes and masses of dense hair on the head. The eyes sometimes glittered. The little rice shone on the leaf-plates. It was no eating, it was a hungry dog's gobbling-up food, breathlessly. Under the tree the rim-broken and decrepit cooking vessels and the improvised fire-place lay gaping at the sky. The entire picture attacked Ramesh with its naked reality.

'Binu, who are these ?'

'The Telugus from the valley, Sir. So many like them roam the jungles driven by hunger.'

'Where is your home ?' Ramesh turned to them. After two more repetitions of the question, the old man replied, without lifting his head from the leaf-plate and looking rather annoyed, 'Simachalam'.

Binu explained to Ramesh that the place was sixty miles away. Ramesh remembered : once upon a time it was part of Orissa. History stood before him as a huge dark hill, then it grew smaller and smaller almost becoming a mound of earth and then, suddenly it sank in the gaping, cold eyes of that young mother who was now feeding and fondling the kid. Ramesh knew in a flash that the place may no longer be in Orissa, but it was there very much a part of the wide world and its people who were condemned to their ancient hunger. 'So many like these are roaming the forests, Sir. The bigger fear of hunger has made them fearless of the lesser categories like forests and the wild animals,' Binu said.

'Quite so, quite so,' the Kondhs echoed. They had drawn nearer and an old Kondh said, 'When hunger or pain attacks, men are all alike. Look ! how hungry we have started feeling. Where is the arrangement for food, *chaprasi* babu ?'

Silently Ramesh walked ahead. Suddenly he felt a creeping confusion darkening his objectives. He wanted to do justice, but no longer knew what that word meant. Always he had depended on the short-cuts of established ways and conventional modes, always he had bowed to established laws, written rules and had felt it wrong to look deeper to see what lay behind them. Sometimes his sense of justice and fairplay had coflicted with the law but he had persuaded himself that after all duty was always hard and relentless like the churning of a machine. Driven by hunger somebody had stolen something, his pregnant wife had perhaps rolled and cried on the verendah of the *cutchery* with a year old child in her arms and entreated that there was none else to support them. But nothing had mattered; a thief, after all, had to go to prison. That was law. Somebody else had suffered a year's imprisonment for the theft of a pumpkin because of five earlier convictions. Relentless and cruel were the demands of duty, he concluded ; no place for softness there. He resolved afresh ; he had to catch the rice-smugglers. The noise of the market now sounded near. The rotten fishy smell of raw-hide was everywhere. Men emerged in groups from behind the forest trees. Some had headloads, others baskets hung from the two ends of poles balanced on the shoulder. Small children peeped out of a few baskets. Bunches of fowl, legs tied together and heads looking down, dangling various other commodities and rice. The prey seemed very near at last. Ramesh felt a sudden thud in his chest. Almost running down

the stairs of stones he shouted, 'Binu, now we have had them !'

The market lay before them. Men huddled together, swarming all around like ants. A kaleidoscope of colours, many smells, an orchestration of droning sounds. Raw-hide's offensive smell choked the air ; rows of stalls sold dried fish. Flies buzzed everywhere ; so did the men. The smell of illicit liquor came wafting in the breeze from the neighbouring forest.

Lepers and men with 'yaws' disease, like dogs with weeping wounds, patches of raw wound of 'yaws' with small dark insects sitting on them. Healthy men and women pushing their way through the milling crowd. That was the market.

Ramesh suddenly noticed a young girl with the colour of *champak* flower and a well-carved body. One of her cheeks had a patch of 'yaws', the other cheek was looking red but there also 'yaws' had started. Yet she had decorated herself with flowers and moved slowly, a picture of grace, munching something. And she looked from the corners of her eyes which seemed to smile and invite others to a play. Ramesh closed his eyes and leaned on a tree in the centre of the market. Waves of noise were breaking on his ears. The mind's eye saw that young girl with 'yaws' on the cheeks and smile in the eyes. The Kondh boys danced on the hill-top.

And then he knew. In the midst of dense forests, on the top of hills man lived. The fire in his fireplace survived the howling wind and the cruel merciless weather.

For man was like Dalua paddy ; the more water, the more the plant grew. 'Yaws' on the cheeks and smile on the leprous face. Straining all the life-force a rose had blossomed even

though its petals were crooked and worm-eaten. It may wither and fall. Yet it smiled.

Binu opened the flask and poured out tea. 'Sir,' he called. Ramesh opened his eyes. The crowd was growing thicker around him. Binu whispered in his ear, 'Lot of rice is selling, everything can be caught but not right here. There is a strategic point beyond the market, a narrow depressed lane leading to a thatched house. There we can wait. From there it would be almost like shooting a tiger from a *machan*.' Binu smiled.

All of them went there. Ramesh sat on a chair. Binu left, saying, 'Let me now go and give final touches to the operation.'

Ramesh kept sitting. A little further away on an elevation on the hill-slope was a Kondh *bustee*. *Charpoys* were spread out in the open. Dogs waited near men, wagging their tails. Some kids were beating a huge drum to their heart's content. On a doorstep an old man sat vomiting. An old lady anxiously caressed his back. Must be malarial fever. A goat stood on heaps of broken walls and munched the twigs of some tree. Time flew by as Ramesh kept his eyes fastened on that scene. He wiped the sweat from his body, tried to take out the dust of the market from his nostrils. The day was drawing to a close, shadows lengthened in the late winter sun and the picture of an ordinary *bustee* with its simple everyday world lay spread out in that faded background.

Suddenly somebody started weeping. People ran out of all houses and rushed to that house from where the weeping came. In front of the house and at the doorsteps in no time there was a crowd. Scratching their cheeks and beating their chests they all wept bitterly. Gradually it transformed itself into a rhythmic, piteous fury, a chorus of death-music.

'Alas ! Alas ! He is dead, he is dead.' Binu came back, almost from nowhere. 'I have arranged everything, Sir. The *paiks* were in the market. I have asked them to drive all the smugglers here.'

'What happened there, Binu ?'

'Nothing very much, Sir. Somebody is dead. Must be out of hill-fever. Nothing new in that.' Binu kept standing behind Ramesh. Ramesh kept listening to that weeping. Ever new, ever old. And the wheel turned, life, death, reproduction. Every picture melted and changed. In his mind's eye floated up his village Kantipur in North Balasore. His home, parents, neighbours, known old men, known children and known girls ; all the distance from the burning-ghat to the centre of the village, to the place of Chandi. Death, life, regeneration. There too lived men who loved peace and tranquility, who had no quarrel with life and who suffered pain even though doing no harm to others.

The refrain of the chorus of the death-song continued.

So many had gone earlier, so many. In dark nights the villagers light up torches of fire and invoke them, 'Come back in darkness, return in light.'

The vast plain of death lay ahead of him. There, language and country did not divide. All were equal and eternal.

Standing behind, Binu too thought of his home, his youngest wife. Would Bisi be coming ? Suddenly he slapped his own cheeks. Ramesh looked at him. Binu was rubbing his cheek with his palm. 'This place is full of very big mosquitoes. Their bite is very painful,' he added.

Ramesh was startled. He could see himself lying on bed,

shivering. Eyes bloodshot, body dark as a bear. It would start at one hundred and three degrees temperature and make one feel like biting, abusing, running mad.

Vomiting, heat, mounting heat and then ?

Birth, death, reproduction, birth, death.

Law does not come to the mind. Birth, death, man. As if he suddenly saw everything with new eyes ! Men walked, many men, getting lost in the dark. But the stream did not die. It flowed on and on. The market was coming to a close. Men were moving. He felt he knew everybody, all these people, in person. Pressure of wants at home, oppression of life outside. And yet they moved on. Caste and language did not matter. They were men. His villagers, known men. In the unending stream an ant looked up to other ants, an ineffable smile flowed from its dried-up eyes as it seemed to say : 'We are brothers, we walk on our feet and work with our hands : we belong to the same land, this ancient earth under the sky. Our enemy is common : those who snatch away the little food from our mouths, crush us to death and heap hot ashes and cinders on us.'

The stream of ants flowed on. In the depth of Ramesh's mind the un-extinguished lamp of smile and fire continued to burn.

Suddenly there was commotion outside. The *paiks* were coming, followed by men carrying baskets and bags. In a moment Ramesh was transformed into his official self, stood up and accepted the salute of the *paiks*. Binu rushed forward and said, 'They are being dragged here in groups.'

The *paiks* said, 'Kindly see, Sir, how these fellows were smuggling away rice from this market to the plains below. The

baskets and bags have only a top-dressing of chillies, turmeric and tobacco but below these there is rice. They will sell the smuggled rice at exorbitant rates. For a handful of rice they wlll eat up the flesh and blood of men.'

Ramesh looked again. An army of skeletons stood facing him. Ribs showed as iron shafts of a hoeing machine, skins dangled on the ribs as on a bat's body, the bodies all twisted, bent, only heaps of oil-less hair on the head and tiny flickering eyes. Were they men or the ghosts of men ? Entreating in their strange language ; now weeping, now pointing to their cavelike bellies and mouths, now dangling their slender, weak, twing-like hands. In the *bustee* on the other side, the dead body was brought out of the house. Presently men were jostling about, throwing their heads forward and weeping in a chorus,

'Alas ! Alas ! Who snatched you away ? Who ate you up ?'

And down there in the narrow lane below the *bustee*, the living ghosts entreated and prayed, beating their chests and heads: 'Oh God Almighty, Oh father.' The *paiks* roared, and Binu shouted, 'No, no, that won't do. Open up the bags, show the rice.'

Ramesh closed his eyes, something tottered and crashed inside him. The exhaustion and hunger of the long trek closed in and submerged him. Eyes shut, he could only see the confused, crazy, co-mingling sea of men, 'yaws' on the cheeks, smile on the face, shrivelled skin on the body and glitter in the eyes. Everything was mixed up, inseparable ; the piteous wailings for the dead, the heart-rending cry of deprivation and proverty, the fire and storm raging in the caves below the eyes. He opened his eyes and looked ; the cry was continuing. 'Have

pity, Sir, have mercy Almighty, see our condition. Before him stood a tall skeleton of a man, almost made of dried palm-leaf. Two long hands went up, joined in salutation and then slowly drooped down. They could crumble to pieces anytime! An empty, hoarse voice entreated, prayed, 'Have pity, my father.' What was the language? Ramesh did not know. But the meaning went in. Prostrate on the ground and stretched right up to his feet that shadowy figure raised its head and the eyes looked Ramesh straight in the face. That look took the shape of the look of some known person, known to Ramesh, known to all. It went out of every person when hunger struck and looked quizzically as if from a mirror. Ramesh felt he knew all these people intimately, like his villagers. No longer he was seeing their shapes and forms; the intimacy of their inner self over-powered him. That shape just before him was his long-dead 'Sapana' uncle, the same dishevelled hair, the madman's unshaven face, those gaping pits on the thresholds of the bones. Only he looked more tired, more hungry, more frightened by the terrible vision of death. That other old man, moustached, all bent and crooked, was none other than the hapless blacksmith of Kantipur village!

And those urchins with only skin and bone. Were they not his village boys who had entered his garden and ate up all the raw guavas? And those women looking like tattered, frail, leaking boats? Were they not his village womenfolk rushing to collect fallen dry leaves for fuel early in the morning? Ramesh tried to hide his eyes, hanging down his head. Only, his brief murmuring words could be heard, 'Go, go away.'

Binu could hardly believe what this officer was saying. Did he seriously mean it? Anxiously he entreated, 'Sir, but Sir.' But Ramesh only repeated, 'Leave them. It is getting late.

Go away, go.'

Binu groped in his memory for the image of authority. Certainly it was not like this this young boy, soft and kind-hearted, hardly knew the world. Moustaches just sprouting, slim, with a delicate voice. Hardly an officer, he concluded. Real *authority* was like tiger. Binu had seen many down the years. In his twisted lips there was a strange expression. Partly in smile, partly in ridicule.

Ramesh kept standing. Before his consciousness there was no more any history. Time had ended. There was no Kapilendradev, no Purushottam, no Konarak. There was no special distinctive image of the men who form the backbone of a country or a nation. History was devoid of sense, meaning. There was nothing but ants, ants ; everywhere, hungry ants carrying mouthfuls of food to live, to survive and the stream of ants converging on ant-heaps for a new lease of precarious life. The ant wanted to live. Ramesh felt a cold shudder. The brief sunshine of late winter had faded. All around a thin layer of blue haze was spreading. It was evening. He felt the cold of *Magh* month inside.

The Somersault

The day Jaga Palei of Sagadiasahi defeated Ramlawan Pande of Darbhanga to enter the finals of the All-India Wrestling Competition being held in the Barabati Stadium, the sky was rent with the jubilant shouts of thousands of spectators. It is not the victory of Jaga Palei. It is Orissa's victory. Orissa has won. This was the feeling everywhere.

At that moment, Jaga Palei became a symbol, the symbol of glory and the fulfilment of the hopes and aspirations of the Oriya people. A sea of humanity surged forward to greet him, to meet the heretofore unknown, unheard-of wrestler. The waves broke on each other; there was a stampede. At least 21 persons had to be removed to hospital. The situation became so riotous and uncontrollable that the police had to be called out.

The crowd that returned home that evening had among its numbers those who had their shirts torn, watches and fountain pens lost, and their bodies sore. But everybody carried in his heart the Oriya national consciousness. And something else, which may be termed as the intoxication of heroism. As if each one of them was a Jaga Palei ! Newspapers flashed photographs of that momentous wrestling match. All the Oriya papers raved mad in Jaga Palei's praise ! 'Jaga Palei—Orissa's glory'; 'Jaga Palei—Orissa's honour'; 'Jaga Palei, the unparalleled Oriya wrestler'. 'Never-heard-before Wrestling at Cuttack!' 'Jaga Palei, Emperor of athletics'; 'the newest success of the unbeaten wrestling artist' and many other captions.

Excitement spread rapidly to the rural areas as soon as the

newspapers published the news. Many cursed their bad luck that they could not be eye-witness to such an epoch-making event.

The week that followed could legitimately be called "Jaga Palei Week. In buses and in trains, in hotels and in the village *Bhagabat-tungi*, the talk was only about Jaga Palei's wrestling feat. This news completely over-shadowed all other daily news like the 'Rocket to Mars', 'Man's flight in Space', 'Death of Lumumba and the subsequent daily events of Congo's politics, 'success and failure in panchayat samiti and zilla parishad elections' and many other exciting changes in the country. Since there were no auspicious marriage dates in the coming one .year hundreds of marriages were solemnised in the fortnight following this event and in these festivities a frequent subjeet of discussion was Jaga Palei's wrestling.

'Did you go to see that wrestling ?'

'How did you like it ?'

Even if one had not gone, one had to answer, "Oh, yes, of course ; it was simply wonderful." As if to say that one did not see it was worse than confessing a hidden guilt.

During that Jaga Palei Week, a small five-page booklet was selling in crowded places. The poet 'Abid'. Price ! Ten paise. Hawkers were seen hawking the songbook with harmonium accompaniment in front of the Cutchery, Railway Station, Bus Stand and Big squares. Glassframed photographs of the wrestling event went up on the walls of photographers' studios, and also at sweet-meat and tea stalls and the 'paan' shops in the town. Alando Mahila Mandali, Olangsha Yubak Mandal, Gababasta Grama Samaj, Bamphisahi

Tuckers Club, Ganganagar Sanskritika Sangha, Uttarward Kuchinda Minamandali and Ghusuri Abasor Binodan Samaj and many other institutions passed resolutions congratulating Jaga Palei and sent them to the Press.

Just when his name had become a by-word everywhere, Jaga Palei of Sagadiasahi still followed his traditional profession of carrying gunny bags in the Malgodown. He had done this job ever since he was fifteen ; from the day his father Udbhab Palei returned the bullock carts of the money-lender, came back home, slept on the spread out end of his dhoti and never woke up again. Uddhab Palei had got an attack of pneumonia. The Chhotamian of Mohamaddia Bazar had come and tried to exereise the evil spirit. Govinda Ghadei of Janakasahi who keeps different tablets in his shop inside the Cutchery premises for curing different diseases, administered four different tablets, bitter, kasa , raga (hot) and saline respectively. For this he took one rupee seventy-five paise. Karuna Gosain, the monk of Tinigheria had prescribed that he should feed eighteen bundles of straw to stray cattle on a Wednesday and then lay himself prostrate on the dust of the street. Uddhab had obeyed this prescription as well but nothing held him back. He died without an opportunity to kuow if mankind has discovered any medicine for curing pneumonia.

Fatherless in the big city, no job, no savings, no help. The greedy eyes of the well-to-do on his two-roomed thatched house and three *gunths* of land. Widowed mother, two minor brothers —Jaga and Khaga and the twelve-year-old sister Sara. The well-wishers arrived and proffered their advice. "Sell away the plot of land, build a small house elsewhere and with the

balance amount start some business." The argument appeared *prima facie* reasonable. The ancestral plot of land may be in the congested locality of this town but a little away was the main road where a *gunth* sold at seven hundred rupees. With two rooms on it, it may fetch three thousand rupees. Wouldn't it be so much cheaper to purchase land and build a house in Tulsipur Bidanasi, Uttampur and around the Dairy Farm.

The plot. At its back a dirty dark drain, on the right a tank whose rotten water threw up bubbles constantly on the left a washerman's house and the bustee that extended far. In the front a lane hardly six to seven cubits wide and the back of the boundary wall of the doublestoreyed building belonging to the money-lender Garib Das. Through the chinks in the boundary wall black waters tumbled down and accumulated in that six to seven feet wide land, grew, extended, putrefied.

But Uddab Palei never sold that small plot of his ancestors, nor did his wife and son sell it. The advice of the wellwishers remained unheeded.

Another bit of advice from the same well-wishers was that the members of the households should take up service as domestic servants. Or else who would maintain them? At fifteen Jaga looked quite a man. Various offers came; apprenticeship in driving bullock-carts, operating machines in a saw-mill, service in shops. A Baboo induced him to do some domestic service with the chance of a peon's post later. Another person came and told him that Jaga had a very good fortune as his Sahib wanted him to be his personal valet. No work—only to accompany him whenever he went, a little bit of miscellaneous work as per his

orders and there would be no end to good food, tips and the salary to cap it all ! Jaga was given the dream of flying in cars and planes, sleeping on thick mattresses, wearing costly dresses and eating good food. Many would come seeking little favours through him, flattering him in diverse ways. It would be for him to make or mar them. He would be a strong, stalwart person. The Baboo had done everything for persons who depended on him. After all for him money was just like earth and pebbles !

Jaga Palei listened to every thing in silence. Somebody seemed to whisper inside him "Do not listen Jaga, close your eyes, say 'No'. No, you will not take to servanthood. However ferocious a dog with a thick blanket or fur, thick tails, huge body and large teeth—a dog remains a dog at the master's call. It would lick the boots and lie chained to a post. A dog seen from a master's car staring from behind the glass panes with big open eyes at the road and licking its tongue may excite the onlooker's admiration. Nobody, however, ever forgot that he remained only a dog."

To fifteen-year-old Jaga Palei such thoughts came naturally ; it was in his blood. The tradition of endless ancestors ; of people who tilled their soil and preserved an unbending tensile dignity which three generations of town-life had not corroded by rusting.

Jaga turned his back on all the offers and persuasions to choose for himself the life of a daily wage-earner, carrying loads everyday. His mother did not object. With the help of her daughter she opened a small snack-shop in the front room. His mother had nack of preparing good and tasty food. Sales were brisk. Khaga went hawking ground-nut

and bara bhaja. Thereafter he took a job of rolling bidis in a factory. Somehow, the family of four members lived on nobody died, the house was not sold. From the outside everything looked the same. Four persons became of one mind, suffered hardships and privation. Nobody could know of it.

Jaga had one obsession in life. Physical culture. Early inspiration for this came from his father's god-father, the old *Khalipha* of Sagadiasahi. Jaga remembered his mango complexion, the body of a young man, the flowing beard, the look of a child in his small blue eyes, and the green turban. Once he had tugged at Jaga's shoulder and asked him why he did not attended their *akhara*. He had asked Uddhab to hand Jaga over to him so that he could make a wrestler out of him. Uddhab had smiled and agreed. That was the beginning.

The small rooms in an old building near a tamarind tree with a compound wall. That was the Khalipha's house. No wife, no children ; nobody knew if ever there were. Only a single pleasure in life the *akhara*. Only the *akhara* inside his compound. From early morning before the darkness lifted, Jaga used to go to the *akhara* and do various types of gymnastic exercises including practice with the club, the lathi and wrestling. Many joined the *akhara* ; many also dropped out. But there has been no sun-rise when Jaga Palei would not come out from the *akhara* after his exercise.

Khalipha knew people in the other *akharas* in the town. When wrestlers from other towns come he would arrange a competition. Jaga was unbeaten in these competitions. The town people who cared for wrestling soon knew his name. They would praise his iron-like body, the lightning speed and

the marvellous tricks he had learnt from the Khalipha. But rarely were these people from among the higher circles or the white-collared ones.

Mostly they were shopkeepers, the tailors, butchers, drivers, carpenters and so on. They would be busy in their profession. Besides Khalipha had his regulations. No showing up, no publicity. Only during Dussera and Muharram was there a tradition of his team going round demonstrating their skill. Besides this, there would be competitions.

While growing up as a wrestler, Jaga had various other offers of jobs. The watchman's job guarding somebody's house with a rifle or a lathi, walking up and down. Good pay. The other proposal was still more astonishing. Enough food, monthly salary; special payment for special items of work. And the work would be of the age-old, time-honoured variety. To act as a *Kichaka;* in modern terminology, goondaism. But King Virata would be defended by Kichaka. New empires had opened up in business, trade and industry. And empires always needed Kichakas. It was for the master to point a finger at the enemies. Then there would be work of all descriptions : a stare hard at somebody render somebody lame, break somebody's neck, confine somebody illegally, lock someone up in a house, throw stones at somebody's house at night, accost samebody on the way and so on. If dragged to the court the master would defend through lawyers without getting identified.

There was another proposal too. He would be somebody's son-in-law and remain in that house-hold and enjoy the property. Somebody had perhaps appreciated his health and beauty while looking down through the window of the first

floor of a building. This proposal he had also turned down. What remained was the old work—carrying grey bags of cement from one place to another and getting payment per bag.

After the big wrestling match that day he found strangers crowding round him and jostling one another. Lights flooded on him from many directions and snaps were taken. Then came the rain of questions. Questions and more questions even before they could be answered: "How long have you been in wrestling ? Who is your *Guru* ? Ah, Omar Khalipha ! Whom did you defeat earlier ? Please give a list. What prizes did you win ? What is your diet and in what quantities ? Are you married ? How many children ? What do you consider necessary for health and long life ?"

Somebody from the crowd shouted, "Do you agree that vegetable ghee is very conducive to good health ? Ah, you have never taken that !"

More questions. How may cups of tea do you take per day ? What tea ? You never take tea ? Couldn't be please tell us the truth, Sir ? What *bidi* do you prefer ? Which Gurakhu do you use ? Which party do you support ? What do you think of the recent changes in the country ? Oh, when can you grant an interview ? We would like to publish your photograph along with your signature and your views on our commodities : flash it in cinema slides and finalize the dues. Please, your autograph please. And all the time, more jostling and pushing about. The waves were breaking. And that solved many questions. The questions could hardly remain in their places, Jaga Palei felt suffocated. He stood in grim silence and folded his hands. That too was photographed. Then he turned to a side and ran through the crowd, still afraid that they may follow him.

First he went to his *Guru* and fell at his feet. The Khalipha embraced him, his flowing beard touching his chest and back and said, "That's a good boy; You have preserved my name". He hardly noticed the praise from other quarters. He knew, somebody wins and somebody loses. Just as in this contest he had won and the other man was defeated.

From the Khalipha he went to the temple and listened for a time to the peaceful music sung to the accompaniment of the tambourine. On the way back he heard the radios blaring forth the news of the wrestling. A little later the newspaper vendors were shouting the same news, carrying bundles of papers. His head was reeling. Instead of returning home direct, he went to the Kathjuri embankment. Returning late at night, he found an elaborate meal awaiting him: rice, dal, mashed potato, fried brinjals, fish curry. His family members embraced and patted him and praised him in their own way. Excepting a few neighbours, none else came to look him at. He was relieved.

Before dawn next morning he was back at his exercise and then the daily carrying of bags. He did not say a word to anybody about his profession and his private life. Newspapers gave out that he was a labourer. He was not aware how news about him had spread; but news of his achievements also circulated in that area of the Malgodown where he earned his daily wage, and people would stop him on the way to congratulate and ask about his wrestling. They would tell him about his high place in the world of Indian wrestling and how he had raised the prestige of Orissa. They said he had a great future if he only won the last round. That would bring him greater prestige and status and take him to wrestling matches outstde Orissa and even outside India. He would then go to

Ceylon, Singapur, Mongolia, Peking, Japan, Russia, Germany, America, Africa and so on. Along with prestige he would also earn a lot. For all this, he had only to win the last round of the All India Wrestling Competition.

And there also a lot of useful advice ! He should take greater care about his diet, health and regular practice ; he must take fruits, mutton, milk, vitamins; he ought to be careful. After all he had to hold aloft the prestige of Orissa and later of India.

The flood of advice made him sigh wearily. He only saw mutton when walking down the tired streets. Milk was a dream. And by fruits he understood banana or at the most coconuts. All that he aspired for was a seer of *chura* per day but his domestic budget was tight and rarely permitted more than half a seer.

A few days later a large number of labour familes came from down South. They camped in the open under the tree and all that they wanted was to earn some wages and somehow exist.

The wage rate went down. To his utter misfortune, his younger brother Khaga met with an accident while returning home from the Bidi factory. He had fractures and multiple injuries and was carried to hospital. This added to the woes of the family and Jaga's daily worries.

A newcomer opened a small hotel at the end of the village street and started selling various types of delicacies and sweets and cakes and tea. The place had a different setting altogether. Benches and chairs were provided and food was served in sparkling clean plates with a fan overhead and music from the radio. Customers started dwindling at the shop run by his mother and sister. Wants stared him from every side.

And yet Jaga Palei persisted with his wrestling. His diet came down from half a seer to a quarter seer of *chura* and fried rice worth only four annas a day and one cocoanut in three days. He would fill his stomuch with some rice and some available green leafy vegetables. Hunger would burn fierce in his stomach. When there would be no work, Jaga could be seen sitting in grim silence, lost in thought. He would feel how lonely he was, how friendless, forsaken! Everybody had forgotten him a few days after the wrestling match.

Three months passed. Then came that fateful day of the final test Dilip Singh of Punjab versus Jaga Palei of Orissa. The newspapers also flashed the report along with an analysis of the match. All were agreed that the wrestling, the artistry and skill which Jaga applied against the heavily-built, massive Dilip Singh were superb but the odds were heavy against him. It appeared that Dilip Singh would fall flat, but ultimately he won.

Dilip Singh's life-sketch was there in the papers. All the great men in the wrestling world were his patrons. There was also news about the variety and quality of his diet, how his weight was taken everyday and many other facts about him. Jaga Palei was again in the wilderness. Fresh discussions started in trains and buses and in crowded corners. Some people even expressed resentment against the man who had soiled Orissa's name ; many were unhappy and crest-fallen. Even that too was quickly forgotten. But the day after the wrestling like any other day, Jaga Palei had quietly gone to his exercise and the carrying of bags.

Destiny

Kumar Purnima was drawing near. Natabar was in the town to buy clothes for the festival. It was afternoon when he deposited all his purchases in the house of a friend, a Moharir, and went out for a look at the town. The town appeared busily impatient. Suddenly Natabar emerged from his sense of laziness into a kind of wistfulness. He remembered a story from his childhood a school-going child soliciting others to join him in play but neither the ants nor the bees, were free to join him. And finally the boy had to go to school. What would these children be reading these days ? Would it be the same old story ?

Natabar looked at the town's primary school on the side of the road. Children in different classes were shouting out their lessons in a sharp, resounding chorus. All that could be heard was a mighty roar and not the content of the lessons. On the other side of the road a saw mill was also hissing and humming, contributing to the noise. Natabar gaped at the saw mill for five whole minutes, then lost interest and walked along the road.

What would his youngest son, Kuna, be doing now ? Natabar started reminiscing. The body had been very, very weak. The village vaidya had said there were worms in his stomach. Pallid, lustreless skin ; inflated tummy, hands and legs thin as wire and the oversized head. And yet what did it matter ? The boy was so fast in picking up his lessons ; as if he were drinking them up. At ten he had already mastered

elementary arithmetic. The disease showed no signs of relenting despite all kinds of treatment, and liquid extracts of yams and pineapple. Sometimes people asked if this could possibly be the son of such a hefty father !

The eldest son, Buna, looked after the lands. It would be desirable to solemnise his marriage this Margasir. That was the reason for the night's stay in the town. The bride's people would be coming to his friend's house in the town where all aspects of the marriage inculding the details of the dowry would be finalised. Yes, the marriage could not be delayed beyond Margasir. Buna's mother rarely kept well. Alas that lady ! A sense of pity and compassion overpowered Natabar as he remembered her from this distance. Fair as a champak flower, made almost out of a single grain of rice, and the dense dark coiffure which, when loosened, would cascade down to the knees. Where did all that beauty and strength vanish ?

It was the same human being but now, taking her hand in his grip made him feel as if it were only dough. She was only five years younger than he and at the most was forty. All that was left now were skin and bone, growing baldness on the forehead, a reeling head, a burning sensation on the under side of the feet and a body that trembled now and then. The vaidya had declared that it was bile and wind formation. Sometimes he was afraid when she coughed that no one would be able to save her. Scholarly texts said If bile, flatulence and a cough should combine, the last breath will rattle in the throat — my dried-up numb soul. Everything was maya, illusion. "Only in this illusory world does one suffer all the miseries—my numb, dried-up soul".

Everything was like the tide, rising and falling, ebb and flood. The flood-plains adjoining the sea, the snake-like river near his village, came to his mind. The tide came and returned ; so too beauty, youth, wealth and children.

At such an hour the mind raced back to the village. The unknown *Babaji* (ascetic) had a small thatched house under the banyan tree on the river bank. He would hand over the *chilum* (an earthen pipe for smoking *ganja*) and add touchingly : "Look son, the tide is in. Man's household is like that".

There was no happiness here. This was after all a town. Every man for himself ; they walked away on their own, preoccupied with their own selves. Not a word spoken, not a word of sympathy. Natabar sighed and kept walking. No particular purpose, only going around. Somehow the night was to be spent and he would take the early morning bus to the village. The landscape of the town. Bright red lips, the smoothness and glaze of young fruit on blossoming cheeks, multi-coloured *saris* and pairs of women of the town in open rickshaws. Natabar again recalled Buna's mother, with a pang in his heart. Repeated childbirth, frequent attacks of malaria had reduced her to what she was today. He felt a sudden gush of sadness overwhelming him. Buna's mother only knew how to give, to sacrifice. She was like a pauper having sacrificed all her comforts unhesitatingly. She had never extended her palms for any favours.

Buna's mother had spent all her energy, courage and beauty. The walls and floor of the earthen house were always smooth and polished. The utensils sparkled like glass. In a corner of the courtyard the lemon tree would grow up like a dishevelled goddess under her fostering care and yield a

bumper harvest. And likewise with all the homestead lands and attached gardens, ponds, groves—the entire house-keeping and household. The earthen containers held different kinds of pickles and dried eatables and never went empty. Even the cowshed was so clean. Flies would fall off from the healthy shining body of the cattle ! She had spent years in nightlong vigils driving away mosquitoes, changing wet clothes taking care of the children. Day after day, over the years, she had scattered her youth, the shine of her blood, her glowing complexion, over so many things ! She did not hold back anything for herself. No matter how hard you tried to dissuade her, she would work from dawn to midnight. Work, work, work. Only work.

And Natabar ? Healthy body. A simple mind. Wherever he went he was confined by his household.

As he was walking he reached the big open field of the city. And what a crowd ! As if half the population of the city had gathered there. It was a forest of heads on which one could float ! The collective spirit of the crowd almost submerged Natabar's individuality, his separate self. Buna's mother flew away. His household vanished like magic. The crowd was ahead of him and his mind played a tune with it. Like a lost lonely lamb coming back to its fold, Natabar almost skipped the little distance that lay between him and the crowd.

A keenly contested football match was going on between Baripada and Jeypore. Where were those places ? Nobody had yet scored a goal. A goal ? What did that mean ? Whatever he knew he learnt there on the spot. The red shirts and the green shirts. The play was in full swing. All the running and tension spread over the field.

In the finest moments Natabar was dispirited. In his wisdom he judged; what a big waste of effort on such triviality? Twenty-two young fellows sweating and running about, just trying out their supremacy on an inflated leather ball! And this is why their parents wasted money on them, to kick at balls!

Twenty-two young fellows. Together they could have dug up earth and prepared it for a mud-thatch house. And if they could take up the plough, each one of them, this lush green field could be ploughed up in no time and smiling crops could grow. Instead, all this farce, this strange whim of city people. They would not eat well but smoke away their money in cigarettes. And this. Where were Baripada and Jeypore?

It was nearing half-time. There was a thunderous, deafening roar. Baripada had scored a goal. Jeypore was trying with all its life to equalise. There, they were going ahead. Jeypore players — group to group—advancing, taking positions, shooting. They were nearing the Baripada goal-post. The tension increased, the ceaseless fight, the circular strategy. That Jeypore player with the flowing hair, snub nose, bony face and dark complexion — how he ran, like the wind. There, how he snatched away the ball; and then the shout, "Look, Kondhia has taken the ball there! And now he is sure to hit it out. Come on, kick it, push it into the goal mouth."

Natabar was intoxicated with the spirit of the game. Surreptitiously, stealthily, a new awareness had taken hold of him. Was it really new? No, maybe it was that very old instinct, to snatch away, to capture, to hold, to defeat the enemy, to gird up one's loins and take all difficulties in one's stride, to achieve one's objective. Not very different from a

farmer or Buna's mother, or village litigations, and warring factions. Litigations running on three whole years, the wanton destruction of crops and houses just to avenge some insult. And that was what it was, self-expression, with the strength of the group. "Come on, kick it, kick it hard".

Without his knowing it, Natabar had identified himself with the Jeypore team ; not only that, he had himself become that tall dark player from the Jeypore side. Maybe he was unknown but his success was Natabar's success now and it was the cry of his soul ; "Come on, kick, a goal, kick." Natabar had pushed himself forward, elbowing his way through towards the frontline of the crowd.

Despite all the shouting no goal could be scored ; somebody was walking away dejectedly. Natabar drew back, unhappy that Jeypore could not make it.

Half-time interval was over in seconds. After soda and lemon water the heroes were ready again for battle. There was a change of sides. Natabar prayed to God for the success of the Jeypore team. Jeypore kept pressing on the other side. There, the ball was moving fast in the direction of Baripada's goal mouth. And now, the goal, the goal !

Natabar was dancing and romping around, his umbrella unfurled. Many others were doing the same. The crowd was a thunderous roar ; tension, arguments, shouting, jubilation. Some for Jeypore, others for Baripada. Some shouted, "Up, Up, Baripada !" Others cried, "Down, Down" ! The play was now rising to a crescendo. Both sides were alert and intense. Sometimes one side drove past the centre line ; sometimes the other side. That dark tall Jeypore team player

was racing along with the ball. Natabar shouted, "Up, Up, Jeypore" ! Somebody was shouting, "Down, Down, the horse : Up Baripada ! Somebody elso was shouting, "There goes the horse, the horse !" Natabar felt hurt. He turned around and asked, "Whom did you call the horse ?"

"Why that one with the flowing hair. Hold on, there goes the horse !"

"Mind your words, I say".

"Why ? Is it because you are the elder brother of the horse, the elephant ?"

"You fellow, you are only a camel —"

"And you ? You are an ass with those huge ears".

Almost without thinking, Natabar had slapped him hard across the face with his left hand. He was a thin, bony man with protruding teeth, a tuft of beard, glasses and a cap on his head. Some blood oozed out from the corner of his mouth, the glasses were ask ew. The man shouted in agony, "I am killed. I am finished". In no time a group had gathered, shouting, "Beat him, beat him up". Some others opposed them. In the twinkling of an eye there was a regular riot. Slaps, fists, sticks, a rain of stones, pulling and pushing thunderous noise and shouts. Somebody was beating up somebody else—he had no time to see. Somebody was struck on his back while trying to pacify the people. And in that choking crowd, children were crying. Some others were running away. The police came on the scene. "Away, get away, away".

The crowd was thinning out. Natabar checked to see if he had been injured and whether blood oozed from his head.

The police **lathi** had hit him ; there was a slight injury. Whatever it was, the war had ended. Along the field the road snaked away on to high land. Baripada had scored again. A deep roar was heard, "Goal, Up Baripada" !

Why ? Natabar felt no heat in his mind any longer. He was returning to his friend's house with a cool mind.

Only half of the ball had stuck in his mind. The optimistic, rustic Natabar was explaining to himself : "What a bad stroke of luck I had and how lightly I have got away ! What would Buna's mother say when she heard about this ?"

Two Heroes

They regarded each other as heroes. Jagu Parida and Ghumpha Swamy. And admired each other a lot. Returning from office to the residence of Gumpha Swamy they talked various matters and enjoyed smoke on the road.

One was from the village Sandhakud in Kujang estate. And he would narrate all the privations, the poor diet, the long walks with which he completed his primary education; then secondary education with a cook's job in the residence of the Manager of Kujang estate and finally graduation with a private tuition at Cuttack; when at last he could stand on his own, victorious in that great war between his dogged aspirations and his predicament, ill-fed, ill-clad, sometimes even without food, he had somehow managed to row on his tattered boat ; had educated his younger brother, given away two sisters in marriage, spent around seven hundred rupees for his ailing father though this could not keep him back and he left the world leaving them alone. And now his own world, three daughters, a son, he himself and his wife. No savings, rather some loans, but he could pay it back. No house of his own but an official apartment. No land, but a job after all. And above everything else, an unflinching faith in God. For, who else except Him sustained all, everything ?

His words were as nectar in Gumpha Swamy's ears. This dwarf little man measuring only upto his ears in height, Mr. Parida. Slight hump of the bones on the cheek just below the eyes, the chin sharp as a crowbar. Pointed nose sparkling at the tip that would surely be quivering in his emotional moods.

The eyes, the nose, the face, all seemed designed to convey varying moods of emotions. The clear transparent face, the guileless slightly-thick lips accustomed, as it were, only to speak in clean unminced words. Brownish skin but with a healthy, contented glow on it. Whose memory did that face, the sudden swerve, the ripples on the shoulders that child-like sparkle in the eyes, whose memory did they awaken?

Yes, whose else but Apu Dorai's, ruminated Gumpha Swamy. Apu Dorai Aiyar, his intimate friend in college life. He left college for Malaya, Singapore and never again they met. He got married. Apu could not see his wife. In those gay days of bachelorhood how much had they imagined, discussed and joked about their wives-to-be. And at that time, Apu had given him a picture of his future wife. Strangely enough, most of it tallied when he really got a wife. How had he known? How often did he wish he could show his wife to Apu and say, "Here she is Apu, the creature of our imagination, now come alive; do *pranam* to your *bhabi*." But it was not to be.

Apu was younger to him by four years. He was from distant Trichur district, had lost his father at seven, and started education very late. Banking on him, his mother opened a coffee shop. Below him were a five-year old brother, another three-year old brother and a sister nine-months old. Getting up early, Apu would help his mother prepare cakes and other snacks for the shop. Throughout the day he would be lost in work. In course of time, he learnt how to stitch paper-plates, prepare different types of cakes and even to sing. A blind homeless beggar had taken shelter on their verandah. He knew many compositions from the famous musician Thyagaraja and could render them in correct raga. Only his voice

was broken and rough, constantly choked with cough that would rise sometimes in endless waves. But Gumpha's voice was very charming. People used to admire his renderings of Thyagaraja. Many customers used to come admiring his songs and would have a fill with the snacks the shop offered. In the evenings he would sing in gay abandon. That was the rush-hour in the shop.

Then suddenly one day one of the customers took up the responsibility of his education. A Malayalee gentleman, Bhadrappa, the new postmaster. With his care, encouragement and help, he could go through four classes and then with a scholarship another four and finally became a teacher. The house-hold works, the coffee-shop, reading college books late at night, and with it, the endless battle with the demands of the world ; winter, inadequate warm clothes, drooping eyes and pouring over books in shivering cold, warming up the palms by rubbing them together or even by taking some exercise. The only fire-pot would be near the beds of the other three younger ones. And in summer all the physical strain in the sweating heat. And privations as usual. With graduation and a job, things could somehow be managed but the wants remained. With his mother's death the coffee-shop closed down. However, he could educate his two brothers and got one of them married. The family now consisted of himself, his wife, his younger sister and his five sons. No savings, no house of his own, no lands ; somehow they managed but they were never in debt.

Jagu Parida looked at him affectionately. A tall hefty man, dark-complexioned, rounded strong hands and feet, a fleshy face, the curly black waves of hairs on the head parted

in the middle. On the forehead a prominent mark of vermilion. The face ever lighted by a smile. Eyes half-closed below the bow of eye-brows and the face glowing with a serene smile indicative of human sympathy, peace and equanimity. Sometimes he felt he could unburden himself if only he spoke out everything to that man.

After listening to everything, when he would turn his head to the left or the right the eyes would sparkle and glitter and bring out an excellence from within.

Strangers, acquaintance of a fortnight only. With the office shifting to Bhubaneswar, Gumpha Swamy had come on transfer. Jugu was there from the beginning. The office was of seven hundred persons, from distant villages, different towns. At five in the afternoon, in flocks they would depart in diverse directions on cycles. Small groups of men engaged in conversations.

In that little world of seven hundred folk, Jagu and Gumpha had picked on each other. At the two ends of a big hall were their allotted seats. In between endless rows of tables, chairs, almirahs, piles of files. On both sides rooms like pigeon-holes and others enclosed by almirahs. So many faces in the enclosed space ; so much history that had taken shape ! Yet they gravitated towards each other from the opposite directions. One could almost feel they had, with effort, found out each other.

But it had all started so simply. One day. Those cubicles of urinals near the western door in the office where Jagu was rushing forward to the clatter of his shoe-heels ringing in the corridors. His absent-mindedness was broken to notice, another person also seeking to get in. But the other person stayed back and asked Jagu to go in. Even at that time Jagu

had not seen his face clearly. He came outside. He found the person still waiting and this time looked at him. The other person smiled and went in. It was this little incident that had brought them together. Jagu had not gone away. The pungent smell of phenyle and detergents was thick in the air. It was not a place to stand. Jagu walked about a little. The open sky peeped in through the huge open door. Buildings, isolated trees, the slope of the hillocks and beyond it, rows of trees of a distant village. Flocks of goats grazing near the bushes and ant-hills, white pillars of electric lines, the sum shining every where and the birds on their wings. Looking outside with his eyes grazing on these Jagu was ruminating over the face of that unknown man. That person who was nobody to him and whom he did not know. He wished he had stepped back and allowed that other person to move in first into the urinals.

The door opened. The other person came out, saw him and smiled a little again. A conversation started but slowly. Not many words. But there was emotion and feeling and the medium was neither Oriya or Telugu but English. Differential accent was only too obvious as they spoke. But they never sought to speak as *Sahibs*. They understood each other and that was all they needed. Engaged in conversation they went outside. At a little distance from the main gate, Gumpha Swamy purchased cigarettes for Jagu, and Jagu purchased pan for Gumpha Swamy from a shop. A new relationship had started.

Thereafter, almost every day they saw each other and talked about their joys and sorrows. Intimacy grew up very fast. They talked as if to lighten the burden of misery and their struggles for living and in that process drew near each other. They knew they belonged to one class; that class of human beings who live on their labour and sustain themselves with

tremendous difficulties and strains. Their boats ever trembling in turbulent waters but never sinking. No savings, no buildings; perpetually chased by want and poverty staring in the face. Often disease and deprivation tore asunder the general routine of life. Winter brought pain and for contracting loan one had to run around. And yet, in the midst of it all, the household went on ; fire burnt in the hearth, children grew up ; marriages and festivals were celebrated and nothing really stopped. Within all these, social manners and etiquette and its manifestations were also preserved. And above everything else there was the primary need to preserve all those hopes, dreams, loves and beliefs that constituted one's true humanity. In their respective houses too they used to discuss each other. One day while returning from office, Ghumpha Swamy almost forced Jagu to pay a visit to his house. "Such a long time you have only been promising to come. I am not going to leave you today." Jagu had agreed smiling.

Small buildings in rows, all alike, with equivalent areas of barbed-wire enclosures and wooden gates. Individual differences were spelt-out only in the landscapes within those enclosures. While some were choked with wild growth of grass, others looked full with picturesque flower-beds, kitchen gardens and occasional rows of other trees. Gumpha Swamy's garden had banana trees on the left with bunches hanging down some of them, two rows of papaya trees, small patches of tomatoes and brinjals, pumpkins and gourds hanging from *machans* and in little plots lush green spinach. On a small circle in front of the house soft yellow chrysanthmum flowers looked like moon-light rolling on the ground. Jagu could see that was the special beauty of his garden or else banana and papaya were in all the gardens. A twelve-year old boy was

digging the soil. Two boys, hardly a year's difference in age, were watering the garden with buckets. The three looked alike, with their shorts and bare bodies above the waist.

"This is my house. Please come in", Gumpha Swamy said. He opened the gate. The three boys did not leave their work but stood and smiled. Gumpha smiled back and said, "This is *Mausa.* Come and do *pranam.*" The boys did that and Jagu immediately entered into conversation with them. What were their names, which classes they read in, whether the taps gave enough water for gardening and so on. Gumpha asked "Where is Ami ?" Ami was his younger sister and had gone to the neighbour's house. Gumpha suddenly remembered that his guest was standing outside. Jagu was taken in. Then Gumpha came from inside with his wife and the sons and introduced them. Jagu stood up and did *pranam* to Gumpha's wife Then they sat down and the conversation began.

Jagu almost forgot this was his first visit to the house. It was not merely the loving welcome or the conversation. Somehow he felt as if he belonged there, all these people were his own, the intimacy was of ages. They had no special consciousness or curiosity about him. As if he was for ever there and they had accepted him as such with ease. The light inside the heart rippled on the faces and love was growing on its own, untutored, spontaneous.

Jagu looked at Gumpha's wife and had a feeling he knew her. A bony sharp face, somewhat long, looking seasoned with worries, hopes and emotions. The grinding worries of keeping a family going in the hard days, the anxieties over five children, sacrificing herself every day through the unwritten troubles and litanies of living, all these had carved out

the picture of her personality. One could imagine her in her many roles : sweeping the floor with her *sari*-end tied round her slender waist, scrubbing utensils, cleaning, cooking, serving. Diseases, stomach upsets, fever, cough, sleepless nights without a wink, she would be serving almost like a machine. On several occasions she must have been herself severely ill ; but no complaints or orders. Instead she would stand it all, quietly go about, light the fire place and see that the children took their meals.

Occasionally she must have remembered all her sorrows, all the poisons of *sansar* and in blazing hot sighs she must have called out to God, in the name she was familiar with. Occasionally too, she must have thought this was patience's end. Then she must have wept and wept and lightened her burden of grief and eased her tense nerves and moods. And she too must have laughed and smiled, occasionally the sparkling eyes scattering everywhere laughter, hope and happiness.

White-complexioned, tall and slim, snub-nosed, the arms and legs rounded and healthy. In the somewhat large mouth thick lips, deep look in the flowing eyes, very prominent and thick dark eye-brows. The beauty of that body was not the organised beauty of an advertisement. It was not the beauty of a mere toy, full, elegant and decorative. And yet it appeared almost to possess, to inspire, to cool the eyes and pacify the nerves. It was what gave equanimity to the mind, steadiness to the soul. Maturing through different forms of happiness and unhappiness, hopes and despair, every bit of that beauty spoke of life and its myriad experiences. The mysterious hidden story of many victories and defeats of many days. As a part of the normal etiquette, Jagu did *pranam* to her and after that, through his look, he did several *pranams* as if his

look wanted to say, "I know you. I know with what magic a two-hundred-rupees need is met with a hundred rupees income. I know you symbolise that energy, that still bigger force which defeats all the powers of the world that combine to destroy the family and makes it live and grow. I know this is not an image made out of ordinary clay. This is living history."

She talked in broken English in which the accent of the south was quite evident. Jagu also spoke in English. His Oriya accent was equally unmistakeable. She had put on a long blue *sari* in the Southern style. Her hair-style was also Southern with crysanthemum flowers tucked in. The ornaments in the nose, ears and neck were very slight and they also had the imprint of the South. The difference of language and dress, however, did not touch Jagu at all. The thought that continued haunting his mind was that she was somebody near to him : one like his mother, sister, cousins or even his own wife. She belonged to that womanhood that was built on solid foundations of duty and responsibility ; to rear and nurture were her assigned jobs.

After a while, Gumpha Swamy's wife went inside to bring cofee and snacks. Jagu and Gumpha plunged into conversation. Two loving souls sought to discover new aspects of each other. There was no need for old things they knew earlier. None had interest to discuss their service careers. Instead, the discussion veered round to social customs, tradition, men and society. This took them all the way from Kujang to Trichur, from politics to the achievement of independence and hundred other things. They found that on many subjects their

experience and opinion were common. Even where they differed the conversation was enjoyable.

As they continued talking, cofee was served with *idli*, *upama, chutni, curry,* etc. Gumpha's wife joined in the conversation for a while and went in again to attend to household duties. Lights were put on, children came in and went to study after taking their snacks. In the meanwhile two persons, who were unknown to newspaper publicity, to meetings, and conferences, whose opinion never reached the authorities and even if they could reach would count for nothing—those two persons started discussing almost everything under the sun. The language problem, India's foreign policy, 5th Five Year Plan, Economics and Administration, Refugee problem, America, Russia, China—nothing conceivable under the sun was omitted. After cofee, they smoked and the discussions continued without any inhibitions of office procedure or official decorum. There was no hesitation as to whether what they talked would be listened to or reported against. The full freedom of domestic bliss prevailed. As they talked along they seemed to open up more and more. And then nobody knew how it happened : without their knowing, a sparkle came to their eyes and an impatience was evident in their manners. Their voices rose in crescendo. Children closed down their books and listened to their animated conversation from the other side of the door. Gumpha Swamy's wife listened to the talks intently, almost holding her breath, from near the fire place. She hesitated whether she should appear and intervene in the talks. The earlier sense of happiness on her face had given place to anxiety and a sense of fear as if every moment she was worried what was coming next.

In the midst of the animated discussion, the two friends had

got into chapters of controversial history of the two neighbouring States, Orissa and Andhra. It was, as if, they were the warriors of two enemy camps and had suddenly climbed down from the temples of Puri, Konark, Bhubaneswar, Simachal or Tirupati !

Jagu asserted : "Orissa was a land of heroes. The farmer-soldiers of Orissa, the *Khandayats* were famous all over India. The word *Khandayat* itself orginated from *Khanda* i.e., sword."

Gumpha Swamy was not to be out-done : "Just like that in Andhra Pradesh the Naidus and Rajulus were famous warriors. They had inscribed their names in history in undying letters of blood."

"The area between Krishna and Kaveri rivers belonged to Orissa. Oriyas lived and ruled there."

"Impossible", shouted Gumpha Swamy with a heavy jerk of his head. "We know, Orissa extended only upto the end of Chilka lake. Later, Oriyas left even that place. The north of Rushikulya belonged to Orissa and down south it was all Andhra territory."

"Will you then ignore history ? Purusottamdeve himself died on the banks of the river Krishna. At the time of Pratprudra the capital of Ray Ramanand was Rajmahendri."

"Those are temporary victories in a war, when one nation falls on evil days and is weak, another nation may conquer its lands and collect taxes. But that does not mean sons of their soil give up their language."

Jagu almost shouted, "Wherever you look, only Oriya names : Kalinga Nagar, Kalinga Patna, Odabadi, Visakhapatnam, Bijaya Bahuda. After the British came, even proper names were sought to be converted to Telugu. Jamadeipur

became Jimidipeta. The forts i.e., *Gadas* became *Gedda*. In temples, in forts, the innumerable copper-plates and the numerous gift-deeds inscribed in Oriya and then above all imprinted history—all these evidence cannot be brushed aside merely by words of the mouth. I tell you, sir, this nation has been throttled in the neck. It has lost Midnapur, Singhbhum, Raipur, Phuljhar, Bastar, Ichhapur, Jalantara Budarsingh, Manjusa, Tekkali, Cangaraj, Madagol and all those areas in the south. It was only yesterday that they took away even Sareikala and Kharsuan." In his voice injured innocence and resentment at being wronged seemed to cry out.

Gumpha Swamy replied, "Granted that Orissa might have lost elsewhere, but it lost nothing in the south. There it was rather the Andhras who lost. Look for example to Paralakhemindi. With what logic is it in Orissa ? Or the Rayagada and Gunpur taluks of Koraput district. Who understands Oriya language there ? And yet Andhra Pradesh was throttled and without any rhyme or reason Orissa's rule was imposed on millions of innocent Andhras.

"What do you say, sir ? Parala, Rayagada and Gunpur ! How may Telugus are there in that area ? When did they come there ? Have you seen those places ?"

"What more would happen if I had seen it. So many people have seen it and written about it. All the places you are mentioning, have you seen all of them ?

"You may look up the Gazetteers, the Reports of the Commissions and, of course, recorded history. From Chodaganga, Narasingha to Mukundadeva."

"I have seen and I am also a student of history. You have mentioned Prataparudra. But don't forget Krishnadeva

Ray. Highly learned, well-versed in music, great warrior and a great liberal ! How many kings were in India like him ? His court was like Bikramaditya's. Krishnadev Ray was the glory of Andhra Pradesh ; his reign a blazing reminder of the glories of the Andhra Satabahanas. Unjustly, the king of Orissa used to rule over large tracts of Andhra territory. Krishnadev Ray avenged that injustice. He first liberated the fort of Udayagiri and imprisoned Tirimalai Routray, the uncle of Prataprudra. Then he occupied the famous fort of Kondavida in the mouth of the river Krishna. There Prataprudra's son Biravadra was taken prisoner. Thereafter other forts were occupied ; Benukonda, Balakonda and then, the famous Kondapali fort. The queen, two sons and seven Ministers of Prataprudra were taken prisoners. Marching on to Simachala, Krishnadeva set up his victory tower there and then proceeding further north, liberated the entire seaboard. You must be knowing, sir, on what condition Prataprudra entered into a treaty." Gumpha Swamy added with a smile, "Prataprudra gave his daughter in marriage to him and made him his son-in-law. And as regards Mukundadev, he was himself a Telenga who occupied the throne of Orissa. This after all is history."

"No, no, no, shouted Jagu, "there are too many imaginary things in it. Mukunda was not a Telenga. He was a man from the south and because of his manners and customs he was called a Telenga—"

The ship of conversation had hit a rock and came to a virtual halt. It had not merely hit the ground. Its bottom had given way and it was sinking slowly. The intensity of Gumpha Swamy's invitation, the overflowing love of Jagu Parida, all the care and affection of Gumpha Swamy's wife

and all those feelings of intimacy and homeliness of the evening had vanished in no time. They were no longer even friends. It was as if two unknown enemies had encountered each other on the way, recognised each other and were preparing for what was going to happen the next moment.

It was at this juncture that the door opened and Gumpha Swamy's wife entered followed by her children. A broad smile covered her sense of fear and anxiety as she asked, "What is this being discussed today ? Is it the stories of kings and emperors ? I thought only the wandering minstrels sang about them."

Gumpha Swamy looked serious, "This is history".

His wife replied, "Please keep your history to yourself. They say if you read the Mahabharat at home, there is bound to be a quarrel. Do you think if your Krishnadev Ray lived today, he would have made you a Minister ? Or would this gentleman have been taken as a Minister if Prataprudra or Pushottam lived today ? At that time also the poor toiled and sweated to keep themselves alive. The womenfolk worried as ever how the fire will burn in the fire-place and the children will eat something and live. The wars fought by your Krishnadev Ray or Prataprudra must have hit the heads of those poor and wiped out their hearths and homes. The towers of their victory must have been built on heaps of human heads".

The two friends were suddenly startled to see her flushed, excited and tearful face, and stood up. She continued, "Which history is giving food to your children today ? Work hard, keep the family going or else that is the end. It hardly matters which language you speak : Tamil, Telegu, Oriya,

Bengali or Punjabi. Dress as you like. But remember God, take shelter in Him and walk the path of righteousness. Then only you can live as man in this world. Ah ! you men-folk. With what solicitude, anxiety and efforts women create, preserve, protect and nurture and what devil possesses you that you are impatient to demolish the whole world and allow everything to go up in flames in no time !"

"No, no, it was nothing, it was nothing. We were only talking."

The two friends spoke out together. The past had vanished in a moment. Simpler emotions had returned. Gumpha Swamy smiled. Jagu Parida smiled. Jagu invited : "Tomorrow evening all of you are coming to our house. I will come and pick you up."

"Sure, sure", replied Gumpha Swamy. This time it was not merely a nod of the head. His whole body jerked forward as he said that. Jagu got up to go, overwhelmed with joy.

Gumpha Swamy took Jagu's hand in his hand in a rapturous, hard hand-shake and whispered into his ear, "We are two brothers".

Jagu Parida put his arms around Gumpha's waist, embraced him and said, "not merely of this birth, but of innumerable births".

Road Closed

Winter in the metropolis. The flood of 10 o'clock office-goers in the river of the street, over-flowing with men and vehicles. Hurried, impatient, deafening sounds. Swirling, milling crowds. Four lines of automobiles, tram-cars coming in from behind and you may feel the whole thing is going to break-down, come to a dead stop. But the current moves on. Everything passes, renews.

With unsteady steps he emerged from a by-lane opening unto the street. Two wine bottles in two hands. A young man with a lean, unshaven face. A loose pyjama and a kurta, dense, flowing long hairs on the head. He stood in the middle of the road, lifted a bottle in his right hand towards the sun and shouted, "I, Sridam Sen enjoin : this road is now closed". And then raising the two bottles in his two hands he added, "Beware, the road is closed. Whoever moves forward will have to die."

A drunkard creating a scene on the road. In the metropolis of eight million souls, he was by no means the only one of that type. Nor was this the first time that a drunkard made such a scene on the road. Nobody stopped for it, nobody bothered about it. There were, after all, appropriate laws to take care of such persons.

But the moment Sridam Sen issued his *firman,* suddenly something strange and mysterious seemed to happen. On either side of him vehicles and men came to a dead stop. People started talking to each other in whispers, as if, in a nightmare. Such a vast city, so many men and in this crowd itself there must be so many brave and courageous souls ! But,

as if, some universal unstated hypothesis, some inexpressible sense of fear and embarrassment seized everybody and kept them restrained. Nobody put a step forward.

As if, he was not Sridam Sen ! As if, he was some unknown saint and the surging *bhakti* of his known devotees had spread to the crowd, infected them, assumed many shapes and had grown to enormous proportions creating wonder and fear. This man could make everything possible. There was no need for further questions.

As if, he was a ferocious explosive that could annihilate thousands. The crowd had come to an absolute standstill. Sridam Sen continued drinking on his unsteady feet and, in front of him and behind upto a distance of six cubits, there was nobody. Only empty space. Silently the metropolis was offering its ovation to Sridam Sen. At least a few knew who he was ! And in the small by-lanes adjoining the street his unidentified battalion lay in wait at different places. In street corners, shops, by the side of foot-paths, in so many places and in so many costumes they were there. As if, they were the *Jivan danis* ; they were prepared to sacrifice their lives any moment. And they were ever prepared to break, to burn, to assault. Knives, bombs, arson, scuffles and looting. All manners and styles of use of force. They were seasoned experts. It was their sweet will that moved everything.

Sridam Sen was their sardar, guru, leader. It was rare that he emerged on the street in drunken condition or made a scene. Surely his disciples must be thinking he had some special reason for this scene today. They looked upon him as a God. Guided by his advice they not merely reaped profits, they also grew fearless and their respect and image in the public eye also rose in proportion. When Virata would be the

king they would be his Kichakas. When everybody in fear trembling, would pray earnestly *Dwisam Jahi, Dwisam Jahi* ("kill the enemy ; kill the enemy") they would assure, whomsoever they wanted to put on the throne of Virata : "Don't be afraid, we are behind you". And Sridam Sen honoured so many important persons by his visits. He was somebody's brother, someone's friend and someone's colleague. Like ancient collections of *Chauth* Sridam Sen also collected some "security fee" from the businessmen. Besides that, there were also the festivals and religious functions round the year. There were so many institutional celebrations. On all those occasions, the contributions fixed by him had to be paid. On this street, such a big celebration of Dusserah could take place for full seven days ; there were milling crowds, sparkling lights, operas and music. And everybody knew it was Sridam Sen who arranged all these. Sridam had fixed ten thousand rupees as the contribution from the large cloth-shop at the end of the street. The shop-keeper tried for reduction with the help of the local people. Sridam refixed the contribution at twenty thousand. There was no more argument ; twenty thousand was paid. This and many similar stories were being whispered from ear to ear.

Sridam Sen suddenly got ready for his speech. He looked once to the right and once to the left and started : "I only wanted to see whether you are observing discipline. Whose is the responsibility, you think ? Firstly, no doubt, it is mine. But is also yours. If discipline is not observed everything will go wrong. I am glad you are observing discipline. Do keep it up. Don't forget. Now all of you could go, otherwise you may be late for the office."

The crowd again flowed on the ancient streets. But Sridam Sen was not there.

Drowning

No longer he remembered how and what all happened. Maybe only the mental doctors could say. But he could comprehend the situation very clearly. A small frail boat, no oars, no staff and mat, no other person, not even a tiny rat. He was floating on the sea. Alone.

The day seemed to boil over. A blazing sun, the quiet sky, the blue sea, the blue-green huge oily waves that kept rolling and made the boat dance and play as a cat made a mouse play. He knew, he could see his future. Looking at the sea his eyes met the eyes of the sea. Eyes full of mischief, fun, violence and ridicule. When she would pounce upon he did not know. But he would be snatched away. Was it a contraption to kill rats ? No, even worse than that ; the axe had been raised and was to fall any moment on his neck. As though he was the *meria*, the victim in the ancient rite of human sacrifice, the worship was over. All the royal treatment given to the victim was over. He was the guest of many affections. Everybody eager to make him happy. So much music, so much convival gathering, offerings, flowers. Now it was another time. A post-script. Everyone was silent but anxious. Eyes burning and violent, all the knives raised and trembling in excitement like the blue waves. The *disari* (priest) would give the first stab and then everybody else would fall upon the victim in impatient confusion. That moment was approaching.

During the brief interlude he tried to think intensely how all this came about. No answer was forthcoming. But surely the answer lay hidden, he felt, somewhere in the centres of his consciousness though not available to him. The more the present circumstances pressed him down, the more he felt as though he was born in this very condition and grew upon the sea, in this lonely boat and no other person was ever there, nobody else.

And yet he could remember other times ; dim recollections of objects seen in a dream. A big ship, many persons, friends, relatives. Many faces, many intimacies. Yet no remembrance of relationships or whereabouts. As though something had exploded somewhere within him and he could remember nothing. As though this life was some other life in some other time. Maybe some other life in the past. Only some memories of that life now come floating and yet doubts persisted whether there was such a past life at all. Maybe everybody flew out of nature. Only a moment ago, he himself, a lonely man and this boat came out of the sea and the sea would swallow it again. He felt like crying with all his might. A strong desire to do that shook him for a moment. Then he looked again in all directions. The sea, only the sea, waves mounting on waves, the empty sky. None to hear his cry, none to console. He could not cry. Only the face remained locked in a grimace. And there was no mirror to see how it looked.

Looking at the fearful waves, he felt he was praying to God for a very long time, in nightmarish fear. When a huge wave broke a feeling grew that the boat would capsize. And yet it rode the waves and went on bouncing up and down.

Something in his heart grew, withered and died. He kept on crying and suddenly felt. He had heard him. He was very near, within his ownself and a silent voice went on. "Why this resistance, to what use ? I have ordained this. I am taking away and I will be by your side. Only a little ahead, only a little more to go. Who other than me lasts for ever ?".

No longer he writhed in pain. No longer he thought. Only the distant look, as though in a trance, was all that remained. As though there would never be any batting of the eye lids any more. The waves grew brighter and bigger every moment and were breaking on each other. Unperturbed, the man kept on sitting there tightly holding the sides of the boat.

And when the boat went down under the mountain of a wave, he was still sitting in that pose.

House

Sadasiva got down with his family and all the luggages cluttered-up, from the train from the South. He was on transfer to Cuttack. When they reached the rickshaw-stand just outside the platform, his daughter Mandakranta asked him, "Father, where is our new house ?" Sardula Bikridita, who was two years younger to Mandakranta, was overwhelmed with joy at the thought of a new house. "Our house !", he danced with joy. Little Anustup and Gayatri joined the chorus and romped about and shouted cheerfully.

"Is the pitcher left behind in the railway compartment ?" Damayanti asked her husband as she followed him out of the platform.

"No, I have brought it. Come on," Sadasiva said to his wife.

"Don't you shout so much !", he reproached his children. The people were staring at them. It was quite natural, because their luggage was heavy. The coachmen came running towards Sadasiva, each one of them offering his service.

"Father, how far is our house from here ?" Mandakranta asked again.

Sadasiva did not reply. He despatched the luggage first and then hired a coach for the family. He looked at his wife inside the coach. She was in the family way.

"How are you ?" he asked her tenderly.

"Well", she replied briefly.

"Don't trouble your mother", Sadasiva cautioned the children.

"House, our house", Sardula cried again.

All the children now came in chorus "Our house ! Our house !" Sadasiva and Damayanti sat facing each other. She smiled at him and he lowered his face.

Sadasiva was on transfer to Cuttack after a period of twelve years. Not that he had not come to Cuttack off and on. But he was coming with his wife and children for the first time. The town was familiar to him. He was born in a small village about eight miles from Cuttack at the other side of the river. There, on the ancient homestead of his fore-fathers, chillies and brinjals would be flourishing now ; and he could also visualise the dark-green and circular stem and thorny round leaves of the pumpkin on the forsaken paternal homestead.

Rows of building lined the road. Buildings everywhere. Bricks and sand-heaps ; trucks speeding past with bricks and iron rods. Nobody bothered if a man was run over by a truck. The victim would have died in any case, sooner or later, some way or the other. Progress was not impeded. There were vehicles everywhere, vehicles owned by the rich. Cuttack was an active town, prosperous, crowded, full of varieties of people.

Sadasiva had left Cuttack twelve years ago. He had moved throughout Orissa, from district to district. His daughter Mandakranta was born in Balasore, Sardula Bikridita in Koraput, Gayatri in Russelkonda, and the child who was

yet to see the first rays of the rising sun in Cuttack, was conceived in a far-off remote corner in the Sub-division of Mankadnacha.

But where will it be born ? Which house ? "This town is meant for the rich" Sadasiva said to his wife.

"There is no placc for us here !"

"Come on," said his wife.

"Do you know what is the problem ?" said Sadasiva with pensive melancholy, "People who ought to die at a particular period, do not die"

"What is the good of your worring so much about it ?" Damayanti consoled her husband. "We will get a house sooner or later !"

"Yes, we will", Sadasiva clenched his teeth and muttered, "but it may be a long time in coming". He sighed out of a sense of futile indignation and looked angrily at the dusty road ahead.

There were motor cars everywhere, chasing one another.

Their destination was Ratnakar's house. Ratnakar was an old friend of Sadasiva, now a dealer in iron and steel in the post-war market. Apart from the narrow passage room, it was a very small thatched house. The cots were joined together and the personal effects were heaped under the cots. Some of his belongings were also made to hang from the roof by means of slings. Whatever little space was saved was meant for the living of the family. Ratnakar had five school-going children. He, his wife, his children and his servants were all accommodated in this small house. Besides, the dog, the cat, the cows and the rats had also their places in the house.

In the circumstances, it was natural for anyone to be surprised at Ratnakar's readiness to act as the host to an old friend. But unexpected things do happen in life. Unreality becomes real. Unexpected generosity, unexpected cruelty, unexpected events are a part of life. At least Sadasiva believed so. He would contend that it is futile for us to live unless we have faith in the unexpected. In his miserable condition and the slender income, however calculating he may be, he found to his dismay that the result was starvation, debt, insolvency, and the deluge of darkness, unless something unexpected happened. He compared life to a Greek tragedy.

So Ratnakar had ventured to write to his friend, "You can live with me for a month or so. I have no objection.

There was a thatched-cottage, adjacent to the small house of Ratnakar, and it appeared, as if, it was only waiting for Sadasiva.

It was a cottage of wattle and daub. There were no windows for ventilation. The doors were made of split bamboos. There were some tools and iron implements, some empty and broken wooden containers and some junk. Then there were three almirahs containing books of the children, two tables and five chairs.

Three cots were placed in the middle of the room and yet there was some space left on either side.

"This is the house", said Sadasiva.

Ratnakar, followed by his wife, came forward to greet the guests. The children of both the friends looked at one another.

It was dark and raining heavily. All of them were sleeping on the cots. Sadasiva awoke suddenly. He did not know why. This is life, he thought. It was dark and raining outside. Man ought to die of cold and rain, but yet he does not die. Somehow or other, he gets shelter at unexpected places and continues to live.

He was grateful to his destiny and to his friend, "But what next," he thought. "What next ?"

He started up from his bed as he felt something like a rat scampering away on his hand. He knew that the rats had an unhindered access to this house. They played and ran about the room even when there was light. He heard a variety of sounds underneath his cot. At the same time there came a stench from somewhere.

Sadasiva brought out the torch from underneath his pillow. He saw that an old dog was sleeping under his cot. From the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail it was without any hair.

This dog, he thought, has also a right to live in the house. But...... in order to assert his manliness, he wanted to chase the dog out in return for the hospitality he had received. The dog was determined not to go out into the darkness and rain. Sadasiva chased the dog and the dog, in its turn, dodged him. The cots, almirahs and chairs in the room stood in Sadasiva's way. The man and the dog started playing the game of hide-and seek, running from side to side. The dog participated in this game with much enthusiasm.

Chasing the dog to and fro for about half an hour, Sadasiva went to his bed. The dog did not scratch its skin any longer. It only heaved a deep sigh at intervals. The stench of its skin was there, of course, but the dog was not responsible for it. Reconciled to life Sadasiva fell asleep listening to the music of the rains. Next morning, the rays of the sun were pleasant. Sadasiva felt, as if, the world had taken him to be a Kumbhakarna * and was intent on waking him up by deafening roar and noise from all sides.

He lifted his head slowly and saw a flock of sheep and a pair of bullocks entering his house through the open door. He did not wait.

Sadasiva set out in search of a house. He put a small box of 'pan', a bundle of 'bidi' and a match box in his pocket. He had the entire Sunday at his disposal. It is a country where personal effort counts most. So situation compels a man to discover his personality. Sadasiva reasoned with himself. And so began his bicycle journey in search of the uncertain. In his mind he cut out the Capital town into four sections for the sake of convenience and thought that he would cover it in four days in search of a house.

The people he contacted were the panwallahs, the touts of the street, a few acquaintances and colleagues. They were the people who could possibly give some information regarding the availability of a house.

And he did collect a good deal of information. He also came to know a number of new houses and people. Whenever he got some information about a house, he would jot it down in his diary, and run at once to look it up. But he was always disappointed.

* As described in 'The Ramayana', Ravana's brother who used to sleep throughout the year.

"There is no house," the owner would say.

"But this house is not occupied by anyone," Sadasiva would argue.

"A gentleman has already reserved it for him."

"Can I get that new house after it is constructed ?"

"No. Another gentleman has already paid for it in advance, and out of the rent paid in advance, the bricks have been purchased and the foundation has been laid.

There was no house anywhere.

Sadasiva acquired much knowledge of the topography of the town. What a big town ! How many streets ! How big, really !

The town had grown larger. The people of this town constructed their houses while Sadasiva was touring the interiors of the State. The war-market and the system of controls enabled people to grow rich overnight. There was no dearth of black money and no dearth of rich people in the town. But there was dearth of a house for him.

From whichever angle it was seen, the town looked large and new and strange. Old familiar scenes were no more. Two-storeyed buildings stood in place of ponds where swans used to swim. The swamps and wastelands with their thick undergrowths and bushes had given way to crowded streets. Buildings were coming up even in waist-deep water. It appeared the people in them mocked at Sadasiva.

"We have occupied everything", they seemed to say, "A labourer has no place here ; no place, go back........."

Once he lived in a little house in this town. The recollections of the past crept into his mind as he walked past the site.

There was a neem tree under which the house stood. The frontage of the house looked slightly modified. Sadasiva stood in front of the open door. It was now a homeopathic dispensary.

"Whom do you want to meet, sir ?" asked somebody from within.

"No, just so.

This house no longer belonged to Sadasiva. It belonged to his past. There was a house in the other street in which he lived for a period of four years. Standing near the doorway he could recall the inner apartments. And some scenes of his early youth, too !

He could recall his neighbour's house, adjacent to his study room ; the moonlit nights and the voice of a girl singing to the accompaniment of a harmonium.

Sadasiva stood in front of the doorway. Would there be a lot of noise from within as in those days ? His pet dog, Bhalu, would come running in order to greet him ? Bhalu was fond of sweets.

"Whom do you want ?" A fat gentleman asked hoarsely. Sadasiva was startled to hear the strident voice of a stranger.

"Does Sadasiva Babu live here ?" he asked.

"No, see ahead."

Sadasiva lowered his face and moved forward. Suddenly he became conscious of what he was doing. Whom did he want to see ? It was his own name he said ! If he wants to see himself, he should not go forward. He should go backward and search for himself somewhere in the past. A motor car came rushing from behind. Sadasiva moved to a side and tried to lean against a wall, but in vain. The swiftly-moving car sprayed the muddy water of the road

and soiled his clothes. The people who ride in cars are well-dressed and well-to-do. How will they understand the difficulties of the poor ? They have no time to think of the poor. They are busy about their own affairs. The people who ride in cars are the slaves of their vehicles. The pedestrians of the street are the victims of the vehicles of the rich. They do not know each other.

The muddy water of the road which soiled his clothes brought him back to reality. He had lived in many a house in this town. But why in this town alone ? Had not he lived at many places in this world !

In how many fire-places fire had burnt for him, in how many stations he had wiped his sweat ! And in how many different circumstances of life he had realized his own self !

Then each situation had flowed past.

He had been defeated and destroyed in the struggle of life, but each time emerged again from the ashes of destruction. He was alive again perhaps to fight with life once more.

He had no regrets.

By the time he returned home, it was evening and the dark clouds were gathering. A day had come to an end. But no house was yet in sight.

After having combed the town up and down for four days, Sadasiva joined his office. He joined only in pen and paper, for there was no seat for him. The office was a beehive and the employees were the bees. A number of bees fly into the hive while a number of bees fly out of it. Thus it goes on since time immemorial. Some of the bees are a little big, a little fat while others are a little small, a little thin. Some of

them hum more and sting more while the collective humming of others is so faint that it sounds like a faint and pathetic conversation.

Sadasiva could arrange with much difficulty a narrow verandah on which he put a table, a chair and two benches in front of him just to put up the show of an official. Sitting erect on his chair, his hands on the table, Sadasiva looked in front with eyes wide open. He was an emyloyee of this office. Here he can find and assert himself!

He looked around. He saw the excreta of goats lying at a distance. Some marks of cow-dung were left visibly on the floor. The smell of the goat was a preventive against tuberculosis and cow-dung was a disinfectant, he had heard. He felt that even here he was not the absolute master.

Then came a nanny-goat and her three kids. Sadasiva stared at them in surprise and they stared back at him.

Sadasiva had applied for the allotment of official residential quarters to him.

"The responsibility is not ours", replied the superior officer. Then again he had to fall back on personal effort. Companies are established on the basis of personal effort, Sadasiva was advised; and buildings are constructed, imports and exports are carried on. Then what is impossible? If one cannot get a house, it is due to lack of effort, one's lethargy, or one's misfortune at the worst.

There was no want of assurance. It appeared, as if, the gentlemen in big towns were always eager to help people in difficulty. They chewed pan and smiled. They were decent in their behaviour.

"I will be on the look-out for a house", they would promise. "Do you mean to say that a house won't be available for you ?"

And a new request when he met them the next day.

"What did you do about it ?"

"About what ?"

"About a house !"

"Ah ! it's the house, isn't it ? understand, I'll inform you when I get one" Assurance was there. But there was no house.

Ratnakar never grumbled.

"What about the house ?" Damayanti would ask him every evening. The child that was yet to be born needed a house.

Ultimately it was Damayanti who saved her husband. Sadasiva got a one-roomed cottage in the hospital for which he had applied for his wife's delivery. He moved there with his family.

Sardula Bikridita started dancing with great joy on the small patch of green grass in front of the house.

"House, house, our house", he cried.

Anustup, Mandakranta and Gayatri also started frolicking on the grass. Beautiful was the grass and beautiful were the soft rays of the sun.

Damayanti was smiling from the verandah. Sadasiva looked at the clouds and thought what should be the name of the child that was coming.

The door of the neighbouri courtyard opened, and a funeral procession filed past.

Sadasiva was startled and shouted to his children, "Ah, you kiddies, get into the house. Get in."

The Solution

Dadhi Baban was back home from office after a full day's work. He felt tired, hot and worried as he stood in the backyard looking vacantly at the distance and brooding over the affairs of the day. He remembered that he had seen the sun rise in the morning, he had hurried through his daily chores and had been at his desk punctually at ten and now, the day was almost over and barely an hour of sun-light was left.

It had been a busy day for him in office as usual, with the same strain on his nerves, and with the same boredom as had haunted him for hours after he returned home from office every day. He had been in his chair for hours end on and working continuously without a moment's respite. His muscles ached and there was a confused din in his head.

He thought how his life was being sucked dry in that office, it was being completely wasted. Years had gone by but his lot had never improved. He had put in long hours at his work, and had worked daily on loads of files, but the more files he had done with, the more came to his table from his boss. It had been the same every day. He had the feeling that his out-turn was many times more than the equivalent of his poor salary of Rs. 120 a month. And yet, he had never received a word of appreciation from his boss. On the other hand, his boss lashed out at him with his tongue every now and then, found fault with his work, questioned his ability and even his suitability for the job that he held. Often, his boss admi istered a hard rebute to him in contemptuous and provo-

cative language. At times, he would go a step further, he would pass on a note to him calling for his written explanation and conveying a veiled threat that should his explanation fail to satisfy him, he would be sacked.

As he reminded himself of his daily plight, Dadhi Baban felt disconsolate and desperate. His face burnt. His breath felt hot. He thought that he was no better than a slave and his boss was a slave-driver. He felt that he could not bear to be in his shackles a moment longer than he could help, and yet, he could find no alternative, for without that job he would be undone. He had to maintain himself and his family.

He brooded over his wretched pay. Prices had soared high and mere ten times what they had been ten years earlier, and his pay amounted to the equivalent in cash of the price of only three bags of rice. A bag of rice was needed for his monthly consumption and with the price of only two bags of rice he had to buy all other items of food, clothes, fuel and all other necessaries, to pay rent for the house that he had hired, and to pay for water, electricity, and for all other needs. Fuel alone cost fifteen rupees a month and the laundryman charged eight rupees. There were occasionally, bills of the family doctor to be paid, and there were sundry other expenses. It was next to impossible for him to make both ends meet and balancing of the family budget was a constant nightmare.

But still, he struggled on, cutting down drastically on whatever of his needs he could, and leading a stark, austere, beggarly existence. His fare was the poorest that he could think of, milk and butter were beyond his dreams. Whenever he was at home, he remained indoors wrapped in tattered, worn out sheets which he wound round his body in at least two

folds so as to hide the gaping rents. He improvised many other measures of economy, and yet it was of no avail, he was always in want.

He cursed his bondage of fifteen years in his job which had never brought him a square meal. His debts and his worries had piled up, his work in office had increased and grown more exacting and his boss had never had a kind word for him. It was a bleak and barren future that lay before him where he could foresee no change. As he brooded over his fate, standing under a lonely *sahada* tree, he was filled with despair.

Suddenly, he felt a tug at the hem of the sheet in which he had been wrapped. There was a sound of some creature crying "Mein ! Mein !" He awoke with a start to reality, looked down and saw his pet goat that was emitting happy bleats of welcome. "Mein ! Mein !" cried the goat. It meant nothing in Oriya, his native language, though in Hindi and in Urdu it did have a sense, it meant 'I'. It sounded almost as a bearded Pathan would have said it, the year old full-grown buck which he had fondly named 'Betu', meaning "My son", was sporting a fine beard and it looked confident and reassuring as if it meant to convey. "I am here. Don't worry." He had brought it home while it had been a tiny kid so that his baby son would play with it. His gloom disappeared as he looked with loving eyes at his pet. He sat down and stroked its back. His eyes softened at the touch of its hairy body and he drew in with pleasure its strong goaty odour. "My Betu ! My Betu !", he called softly.

Betu shook its tail with pleasure, stood up on its hind legs, thrust its snout towards his face and gave out a few more happy bleats.

It then brought down its fore-legs and trotted about gaily. It had a red collar round its neck around which had been fastened a string of tinklets which jingled as it frisked. The goat ran to him again, rubbed its back against his ankles and cried, "Mein ! Mein !"

The thought struck Dadhi Baban that he should provide his Betu with a mate. He argued to himself that would fetch him some money in course of time, for a she-goat would bring forth litters and as the kids grew up he would sell a few goats every now and then for meat which he knew, had grown costly. The thought of goat's meat reminded him of roasted mutton and mutton curry and made his mouth to water. He sat down and stroked the back of his plump pet tenderly. His three little children came running to him followed by their mother. Betu jumped, its tinklets jingled and the children ran after it, shouting "Betu ! O Betu !" They had a little fun with the goat for a short while and then their mother led them indoors.

Dadhi Baban stood up and looked at them as they disappeared. A mood of gloom and despair had again descended upon him. He did not move. He was thinking of his poor salary and was comparing his income with that of illiterate labourers, pedlars, hawkers and even of urchins sitting on the pavements who polished shoes, he thought that they earned much more than he did. He called to mind how a rickshaw-puller earned more than ten rupees a day, a labourer at a work-site who carried head loads of bricks or sand over a short distance earned five rupees a day and how a *pan* vendor sitting in a small wayside wood cabin could earn enough so as to own a building of his own in a few years. He remembered Feda Mian, an illiterate man with hardly any savings or resources who had

begun life as a petty bicycle-repairer twelve years before, and had done so well that he already owned four buildings in the town and was doing business as a money lender.

"Why could not I do as much ?" he thought bitterly. He knew the answer. He had his family to think of and he could not afford to leave his job before he had found some other means of maintaining it and whenever he had thought of taking to some other trade he had been damped by the thought that it would take at least two years before a new trade could stand on its legs and yield a monthly income that would at least be as much as his monthly salary. There was no way out of his bondage and the thought made him disconsolate.

What was rankling in his mind and was driving him to desperation was an unsavoury experience that had befallen him in his office on that day. His boss had stormed wildly at him. His shouts of anger and the vituperations that he had hurled against him were still ringing in his ears and were setting his blood on fire. He was cursing his boss to his heart's content. "The fellow is a monster !", he thought, "an ill-bred cur with no sense of descency at all." What worried him most however was that his boss had also handed over a note to him containing an order demanding explanation for delay on a file and had meaningfully added the ominous threat that should his explanation be deemed to be unsatisfactory, punishment would surely follow, be it degradation in rank and a cut his salary, or even dismissal from service. His boss had not minced matters and Dadhi Baban had an uncanny feeling that the follow would really carry out his threat if he failed to furnish a satisfactory explanation. He could not think out what he should write in self-defence because he beleived that whatever reasons he would advance

for the delay would fail to satisfy his boss. He thought that his boss would never accept his explanation, and what he believed to be the truth, that he was being heavily overworked, the load being more than what two men could cope with, and that even the Creator Himself, in such a situation would make similar delays and mistakes. He thought too that his boss would never accept the additional reason and one that he thought would be borne out by any one who had experience of rearing up little children, that for some days past his children had been ailing and he could not enjoy undisturbed sleep at night as he was needed every now and then to attend to their needs and as a consequence, he had at times fallen asleep over his files while working in office. "Nobody wants to hear the truth," he told himself rewfully. "They want lies. But what false plea am I to concoct ?"

The prospect of losing his job haunted his thoughts and chilled his heart though he smarted under the indignities heaped on him by his angry boss and was furious. He could think of no plea which he would offer by way of an explanation. He had pulled out the sinister note from his pocket, had smoothened out the crumpled paper and was reading it over and over again. And then he heard the familiar sound again, "Mein !"

He looked sadly at the goat's eyes. The goat nodded its head from side to side, shook its ears, rubbed its forehead against his knees and looked at his eyes expectantly. Dadhi Baban envied the cheerfulness of the goat while by contrast he himself felt miserable. He was filled with self-pity and he imagined that he was the only unhappy creature on the earth.

Suddenly, the goat snatched away the note of his boss from his hand and before he could reach out for it, he had started chewing it up. The mass of skin covering its snout was curling up and opening out again and again. He made a bid to grap the note and shouted in alarm, "Leave it Betu! Let go!" but it was gone, and was well on its way into the goat's stomach.

Dadhi Baban was shocked. "I am done for!" he cried, "What have you done! Foolish Betu! You have swallowed up that paper!" He could not think how he could write out an explanation that would satisfy his irate and vindictive boss without that paper before him and his job was at stake, together with the very means of livelihood of himself and his family. He felt dizzy. He had read the nasty contents of that note so many times that the words had been imprinted on his memory, but now that the paper was lost beyond all chance of recovery he found to his consternasion that he could not recall a single word of what it had contained. He had only a hazy recollection of the gist as a distasteful experience of which his memory refused to yield the details. He remembered the expression on the face of his boss. He felt that he would not draft a cogent explanation without referring to the particulars that the note had contained, in fact he had thought that every word in it held out some sinister allegation on insinuation which needed to be cleared by him and now he could do nothing about it. And it was out of question that he would face his boss and ask him to write out another note for him.

Something happened to him in the moments that followed, his mood changed. A new look burned in his eyes. "I don't care", he said to himself with a defiant look. He stood up.

and looked at the goat's eyes. The goat looked at him steadily and its eyes were aglow with fire. Dadhi Baban argued that his written explanation would never have mattered, however cleverly and ably it might have been drafted, for nothing that he would have contended in self-defence would have satisfied his boss. He decided that he would furnish no expla come what may.

A storm raged in his mind as he went inside his house. Betu was at his heels. He went into his room. Betu followed him there. A heap of files lay on his table, he had brought those home from his office so that he would work on them at night. He took out a file and held it before Betu. Betu wagged its tail. He made over the file to Betu who at once set to work munching up with great gusto. Betu had tasted local dailies and waste paper thrown outside his house, but this seemed to taste much better. Betu stood up on its hind legs, leaned against its master and looked at his face. Dadhi Baban understood what it wanted and made over another file to it for disposal.

His office was not far from where he lived. When, on the next day, his office opened, the gate keeper saw a strange sight. Dadhi Baban had entered into the compound and was walking up the path that led to the office building and behind him strolled in a billy goat with a red collar strung with tinklets that jingled as it ambled.

"A goat has strayed into the grounds !", the gate-keeper shouted in alarm as he ran to drive it away, "Hey goat ! Out before I break your bones !"

"Stop !" Dadhi Baban told him firmly, "It is my domestic pet and will do no harm. Come, Betu, keep close to me, don't look at the grass." Betu obeyed.

"How strange !" the gate-keeper exclaimed, "It seems to understand what you say and obeyed you at once. It must have been well-trained !"

"It is. It is almost human. Haven't you seen goats in a circus and how they dance when they are told to ? This one is almost human. It understands what we speak."

Betu went in behind its master and soon made the acquaintance of everybody in that office.

Ram Babu, a colleague of Dadhi Baban admired its plump body. "A fine goat," he said, "it would yield nearly six pounds of the best and tasty meat."

"But that would matter little," another clerk Gopal Babu interposed. "It should have been castrated. The meat of a billy goat emits its foul body-odour that is repellent to the tast "

"Mein ?" Betu asked with a questioning glance.

"Don't worry, another clerk, Isak Mian, said.

"There will be no such goaty odour if you will process the meat as I tell you. I know the art. But you must first do *halal* when you kill the goat." He was a Muslim and it is the custom with a Muslim to cut the throat of an animal and to offer it to God before he can eat its meat.

The men discussed the various techniques of processing and cooking an uncastrated he-goat's meat by which its offensive odour could be eliminated. Then they went back to their seats.

Betu made a detour of the office-room, came back to Dadhi Baban,' rubbed his head against his legs and cried, "Mein ?" There was a waste paper basket near the seat of Dadhi Baban ;

he poured out its contents on the floor and Betu settled down, chewing those papers in a leisurely manner.

Work went on in full swing in that office as usual and the clerks were busily engaged in their files. Betu had swallowed up every bit of paper that Dadhi Baban had spilled on the floor before it, it then moved round in a leisurely pace. Nobody paid attention to its movements. There was an open rack near each seat in which files had been stacked. Betu would draw out a file from a rack as it strolled by and then would start chewing it up. Unlike the clerks, disposal of files by Betu was quick and through, nothing remained over for any action in future. It would finish eight or ten files at a stretch, take some rest and then move on to the file-rack of someone else. It went to the seat of the Head Clerk. There were stacks of files in his rack that bore red labels reading 'Urgent !' The Head Clerk had been called away into the room of the boss. Betu disposed of a number of such files and came back. It had lightened the load of the Head Clerk and had left some excellent manure for him.

"Betu !" Dadhi Baban called. Betu ran to him, its tinklets jingling. "Now lie down here", Dadhi Baban commanded, and the goat laid itself down near his feet. Dadhi Baban held its neck pressed between his legs and went on working.

The Head Clerk came back from his boss in a huff.

"Look here, all of you !" He cried from his seat in anger, "You have been delaying disposal of files and the boss vents his anger on me for no fault of mine. I am not going to shield anyone of you anymore. I shall report each defaulter to the boss. Before I do that, I want a straight answer from you. Are you going to dispose of files promptly or not ? Let me hear from you first, Dadhi Baban Babu."

"I don't have any file pending, sir. I have disposed of all arrears. Dadhi Babu said.

"Now, that is a news ! Is that true ?'"

"You can come and see for yourself, sir, I have no arrears."

"That is very good."

The goat shook itself free from the grip of Dadhi Baban's legs, stood up and bleated, "Mein ! Mein ! The Head clerk's table was at the remote end of the room and he had been away when it had first entered, he had not noticed its presence earlier. "How could a goat come inside the office ?" He shouted, "What has happened to the gate-keeper ?"

"That is my goat, sir", Dadhi Baban hastened to reply. "It does no harm. It is a pet creature and is very well-behaved. It took it into its head to follow me here when I came and had been lying down quietly near me all the time. You may be rest assured, sir, it will do no mischief, nor will it wet the floor. It is well-trained. Let it be with me, sir. And you know what the doctors say about the body odour of a he-goat, sir,? It kills the germs that cause pthisis. This dark and stuffy room in which all of us have been hundled together for want of accomodation is, as you know, just the type of place that breeds pthisis."

The Head Clerk was in no mood to listen to Dadhi Baban's talk on pthisis, he was looking at the goat appreciatively. "A fine goat," he said, "it can easily yield more than ten pounds of excellent meat. But why could not you get it castrated ?"

It advanced resolutely towards the file-rack of the Head Clerk where there were many more files labelled 'Urgent'. It had remembered that it had work to do there.

Identity

It was a village in a remote corner in Orissa, situated in a terrain dotted with swamps and cut through by a net-work of creeks. It was the low-lying sea-coast washed by floods every year which gave the tract its popular name *Dhoya*, the 'flooded area'. A mud road ran ten miles away from the village, distanced by three rivers and a swamp ; no other road was nearer.

It was the day of polling to the State Legislature and also to the Parliament. One of the many centres of polling in the State had been located in that village. People of the village who were voters and voters from several other villages around it were to cast their votes there that day.

One such voter was Pemi's Mother. As the day dawned, she got up from bed and went through her routine ablutions. There was a small fish-pond close to the place where she lived. She went there, took a dip in the water and hurried through her bath over which, on other days, she used to spend quite sometime. She returned home, changed into a dry *sari*, and hung up the wet one from the eaves of the thatched roof so that it would dry up in the sun. There it hang looking like a curtain. Her house had mud walls and mud floor. She sat down on the bare floor in the adjacent room near an open door where there was some light and opened a casket of reeds. She took out of it a tiny packet ; it contained a handful of sun-dried fragments of cooked rice ; taken out of the cooked food that was offered to Lord Jagannath, in the temple at Puri and then dried in the sun. Each particle of that rice had thus

been sanctified and made divine. She put a particle of the sacred dried rice in her mouth, touched her forehead with her folded palms and made a deep bow in a silent prayer to God. Her second holy act after bath every morning, was to put a round vermillion mark in the middle of her forehead. The mark signified that her husband was alive ; it was intended, not only to announce that fact to all the world, but also to ensure a long life, happiness and prosperity for her husband. Vermillion powder had been kept for her use inside a tiny box of wood in her casket. She took out the box, opened the lid which was shaped like a dome and dipped a finger in it. Then, while she held a mirror before her face, she raised her finger tipped with vermillion to the forehead and pressed her fingertip in the middle of the forehead leaving a round red dot there. It was like a red sun rising out of a background of mist.

A smiling face greeted her from the mirror. It was the face of a woman of fortyfive who had lived in a village all her life. It had nothing extraordinary about it and was one of the common faces that one saw every where in the villages. It was the face of any one of a large mass of people who lived in want, took much physical strain, bore children and brought them up, and while letting their personal interests suffer, busied themselves all their lives serving the needs of others in the family. They observed all the canons laid down by society and yet walked with guarded steps lest any one would speak ill of them. As could be observed in every home, such a life left its mark upon their faces, making all of them fall into the same pattern, like fruits of the same tree, except for slight variations in their appearance. There was a common expression on all such faces and it was similar to what one would expect to see on the faces of two women, one of whom was fair-complexio-

ned and the other brown, after they had suffered simultaneously from a persistent head-ache for a full-month.

The face that Pemi's Mother could see in the mirror did not look like a full face, it was more like a slice of a face. It was narrow and long, like a piece of a ripe pumpkin. The cheeks were thin, dry, withered, and long. They were two thin slices with a narrow space of two inches; in between them were the upper jaw arched out beyond the lower while, like a tumbling roof leaning on loosened and weather-beaten rafters, the upper lip rested on three jutting teeth that stuck out of the upper jaw and an inch and a half of each of the three teeth lay exposed.

The eyes that looked at her from the mirror were soft and timid. Even a casual glance at them would convince a person that those eyes had never flashed fire at any one, those were eyes that saw, suffered, bore suffering as long as was possible and then wept. A dark, bottomless, pool of water bound on all sides lay in them. Rarely had a ray of light entered those unfathomable-depths. The smile that lit the face was a forlorn smile.

The head was almost bald and remannts of hair here and there were thin and scattered and had not stopped falling, but starting above the middle of the forehead and going all over like a red road cross a flat rocky land covered with a thin scrub forest, there was left a wide and clear mark of parting of hair. Once upon a time, when she had long, thick and glossy hair, she used to part it in the middle along that line while combing it for plaiting. The track was now lost in a fold of her ash-grey sari which covered the back of her head like an everhanging cloud in the horizon at the end of a vanishing road. It was

rimmed by the border of the *sari* which showed some blue flowers in a row, but the *sari* was old and had undergone ferquent washings in the laundry and the flowers had faded.

Pemi's Mother remembered it was the day of the voting. A strange feeling of power and confidence came over her as she thought of the significance of that day for her. She had been a nonentity all her life, she felt that she would no more be that, she could vote.

She mused on the fate of all women in the country. She had been one among many, all similarly placed. She had lived her life like a shadow, and as it were, had kept her face averted while she had gone through life. No one of the men-folk, not even little children would concede that a woman could have views of her own in any matter nor that she deserved to be consulted. The elders said, "Don't listen to women, what hey talk is only useless chatter." Children said, "Don't ask Mother. What can she have to say ?" Pemi's Father said, "Your special forte as a woman consists of three things : cooking food, preparing *pan* and taking care of the children. Concern yourself with these and that is enough for you. On what else can a woman give an opinion ? Nothing."

The pity of it was that even the women shared the same opinion about their class. They would gather at the bathing pond when there were festivals in the village, chat and express those views. They believed that it was a woman's fate, as ordained by God, to suffer without protesting and that protests were of no avail. Illustrating the peculiar fate of being born a female, one of the women would quote a well-known adage about women :

"A punch on the left cheek,
And you say Him !
A punch on the left cheek,
And you say Him !
And for whatever comes next,
You don't even protest."

"And so," she would continue, just as a burning wick is put out, any one who is a female should extinguish herself, and meekly wait on her men-folks wherever they are."

Pemi's Mother remembered too how, when some people were selected by the villagers to adjudicate between two contesting parties, whether as among kinsmen or as between other villages, a woman was never invited to sit on the panel of the judges.

Pemi's Mother had accepted that inferior status for women all her life and taken good care never to express her opinion publicly. There had been occasions in the past when some one had put a question to her face to face and had sought to know her views. She had found such situations embarassing. She would then hide herself in the corner of the room that was next to the door, thrust a handful of her *sari* into her mouth and bite it and draw lines with her finger-nails on the back of the door from the bottom upwards. Even then, lest some opinion might escape her lips in an unguarded moment, she would stick her tongue in the chewed remnants of *pan* in the corner of her cheek. And now she experienced a sense of freedom as she had never felt before and she thought that it would be different on this momentous day, when she would go out in public, as people would be looking on, and cast her vote in favour of any of the candidates she wished, that she had her free opinion, it was valued and counted, it mattered.

She knew that three groupes of people had been contesting the elections, batches representing each such group had come to that village, had canvassed for votes, sung the praise of their own group and vilified the two other groups, accusing them of having done various misdeeds. Two such parties while indulging in vilification of each other's groups had clashed in the village road, face to face. Close on the heels of exchange of foul words of abuse, there had come direct action when lumps of dry mud had been hurled by them at each other and also handfuls of dust and sand. No doubt, they had then sunk low in the estimation of the villagers who had not expected such indecorous behaviour from well-dressed town-bred gentlemen, but before they had done with their preliminary canvassing and left the village on that occasion, they had conveyed a new idea to the villagers about the rights of the villagers and their importanee. "Brothers and Sisters," each group had told the villagers from a platform in public, "Do you know what tremendous power there is in your hands for the reason that you have the right to vote ? Let us explain it all to you." Pemi's Mother, listening to their speeches, had understood in her own way, what that power was. To her it appeared that it was such a powerful weapon in the hands of the villagers that city-snobs humbled themselves before the villagers, begged for their favours and made entreaties, protestations and promises. It was such power that it could enable them to appoint the persons who would govern the country, it could prevent floods and famines, it could lower the prices of rice and other commodities which were of daily use, it could make their fields yield better harvests, it could kill all the mosquitos that were causing malaria and eradicate fever, particularly in their own village, it could raise

a fine building for a High School, it could build a spacious platform under the big banyan tree where villagers often sat together and talked, it could reduce the land-rents, introduce many new machines in the village which the villagers had never seen before and which would bring in remarkable improvements in their standard of life and it could give them many other good things which they had never known. She believed that she, Pemi's Mother, a nonentity for whom no one had ever cared till then, held that power in her hands and that all that she had to do in order to exercise that power was to thrust a particular bit of paper into a box through a slit in the lid of the box indicating her preference for one of the three contesting candidates. She had learnt too, that the candidate in whose box maximum number of papers would be found would be declared to have won, and that a group or as it was called, a 'Party' of which the maximum number of candidates were thus elected would get the power to form the Government of the country and would be enabled to do all the good things for the people, she thought how simple it all was, and how, while she lived in that remote village, she would be directly linked to the power that would rule the country. She exulted in her power, there it was; it was within her. She remembered the line from the scripture, the *Bhagavata* which said that in every being there was God. She thought how nobody had ever paid her any notice even though there was God in her and yet, because of the other power that she possessed, the power of the vote, three batches of people had come to her and had begged her for her vote.

While these thoughts came to her, the 'I' in her, which, as it were, had lain pressed under the weight of a boulder so long, stirred and reared its head. She felt that at length her

day had come, she would vindicate herself by casting her vote.

It was then that her face in the mirror flashed a smile. She looked at it intently. The customary vermillion mark had been put on the fore-head, but the skin was shrivelled, and discoloured, as if her face had been scorched by heat and her complexion looked almost dark. She wondered what had happened to her complexion that had once a tinge of gold in a natural white when she had first arrived in that village as a bride. She remembered how the colour of her skin had been the talk of the village and how elderly women had extolled her complexion in their houses within the hearing of their daughters-in-law if they did not happen to be so well-favoured. She could not believe that while she was only forty-five her complexion had been spoilt for good. Looking at her face she thought that she could still find the original complexion of her skin on the spots where the skin had been stretched while she grinned. She felt strong, confident and dignified. She thought that she had discovered her worth. And suddenly, she burst into laughter.

She was alone in her house at the moment but she tried to check herself. She would not stop laughing even though she admonished herself by the thought that only children laughed for no obvious reason and it was said that Yama, the god of Death made them to laugh.

Suddenly her mood of gaiety was gone and her laughter vanished. She had put her palm on the fold of her *sari* which covered the rear of her scalp and had then felt a tell-tale seam in the *sari* where she had sewn up a long rent. It lay across her head like an ugly centipede. She shuddered at the thought that when she would go out to vote in that *sari*, nobody would miss that seam, people would at once know that she had

nothing better to wear for that occasion than an old, tattered and sewn *sari*, they would then conclude that she was very poor and they could make unwholesome speculations about the status and the class to which her parents belonged and also to which her husband belonged. And yet she could do nothing about it. The seam could not be concealed and she had nothing better to put on. The other *saris* she owned were either tattered or were both torn and soiled.

She began to brood over her plight. Both by birth and by her marriage, she belonged to the class known as 'Zemindars', that had been next in rank to the Kings in mediaeval society, owning estates, lands, special rights and privileges which had been denied to others. But the zemindari system had been abolished and the halcyon days of those who had once been members of that class were gone. Of the cultivable lands that had fallen to her husband's share, a large portion had been sold away in order to find money to get their daughters Pemi and Chemi married, for, in keeping with their status they had to perform the marriages with pomp and eclat even if they had to starve. It was unthinkable for people of their class to till their own lands for that would have been incompatible with their aristocratic status. So whatever lands they had were being cultivated by share-croppers and as the share of the produce that a share cropper had to make over to the owner of the land had been reduced by revised laws; the share croppers of their lands had been giving them only one fourth of the annual yield and had been appropriating the rest for themselves. Her husband, forced to seek some additional source of income, had taken to the profession of healing the sick by a system of treatment which she knew as 'Himi-Pathy' or 'Hini-Pathy', but his fees hardly ever amounted to more

than a rupee, and more often, he received a dozen onions, a kilogram of potatoes or half a kilogram of pulses as fees from some grateful patient. Their eldest son, Panchua, maintained accounts for a grocer in the city but his earnings hardly sufficed for his maintenance in the city. Their youngest son, Musa, displayed such an allergy for his studies that he could not learn even how to sign his name, but his strong build and his impressive appearance had secured for him a watchman's job in a weaving factory. His pay was not even enough to fetch him sufficient food. Pemi's Mother was steeped in contemplation of that side of her existence which was imbedded in want and proverty, it was dark and suffocating and there was no way out. Her mood had changed. She no more looked at the mirror as she sat there, sighing at intervals.

The ancestors of her husband had lived in their stately, multi-roomed house that had stood on the very site where she and her husband had their small, two-roomed cottage. They had been the zemindars of the area. The big door at the entrance to their house had been made of bell-metal plates and its loud clang could be heard over a distance of five miles as it was shut every night. The beams and rafters of the roof were made of seasoned timber that had been polished and decorated with artistic wood carvings. The splendour of that house now lay in dust. On the site where once stood its walls, there was now a fence of dry bamboo twigs. The debris lay about under scattered mounds of earth and here and there could be found an abandoned altar which was a small raised platform of dry mud on which a marriage or some other ritual had been held. The high mud-floors and courtyards of the ruined house were now ideal for growing vegetables, particularly brinjal, but as there was taboo in their society against

growing brinjal on abandoned house sites, patches of that high and flat space had been covered with leafy vegetables and the rest lay bare.

On the site where there had once been the outer room with the bell-metal door, there was now a small room with a tattered thatch which had gaping holes. In it stood a rack for books made of planks from cheap packing boxes. The rack contained the medicine-box of Pemi's Father and he used that room as his Homeopatheic Dispensary. That was also the outer room of his house. Instead of a flight of steps the entrance to that room from the ground below, was a smooth incline on a stony surface. It was the "Dragway Step", a relic of the past, and the right to have it at one's door was a mark of special recognition that could be conferred on an aristocratic family by the King. Another relic of its former glory was an ornamented terracotta vase, shaped like a temple and about six feet tall which stood on one side of the 'Dragway step". It was the vase in-which the sacred Tulsi plant which was worshipped daily in every house was grown and nurtured. The Tulsi plant that grew in that particular vase was barely six inches tall, it was thin and emaciated and had somehow managed to survive.

Even the name that Pemi's Father bore had its pompous mediaeval dignity. While the names of ordinary people were generally made of two words, the first word being the name given at birth and the second word the surname which mentioned the caste, the name of Pemi's Father was made of four words. It was Brajakishore Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra. His parents had named him Brajakishore. 'Mahapatra' was his caste name, he was a Khandayat Kshyatriya. 'Bhramarbar' and 'Ray' were titles given to ancient nobility.

Braja Kishore and his family lived in two rooms within a fenced enclosure. The rooms were in bad shape as they had no money to maintain those.

As the other end of the enclosed area intervened by a vacant patch of ground one could see three rooms in a row. The roof looked strong, the thatch was fresh and thick. The walls were prim and smooth, bearing the signs of careful attention and of plastering with mud at regular intervals. Another room was going to be added and women of the 'Bauri' caste were at work, piling up puddled mud for raising a wall. Pemi's Mother, sitting at her home, turned her attention towards the other house and at once she had the feeling that it was her enemy's house. That was in fact the house of Bhanja Kishore, her busband's younger brother, and his wife who was known as Ranga's Mother. There was no love lost between the two brothers and between their wives.

It seemed queer to Pemi's Mother that her husband's younger brother bore a name that perfectly matched her husband's. It was not merely that the two names rhymed in unison, but, while her husband's name began with the letter 'Ba', in the Oriya alphabet, his younger brother's name began with the next letter in the Oriya alphabet, which was 'Bha.' She could appreciate why their father had selected that name for the younger of his two sons. obviously, it was his dream that the two brothers should remain the best of friends, and the younger of the two should always accord the pride of place to his elder brother and follow obediently in his footsteps, looking to him for advice and guidance in every matter, but such was the irony of life that his hope never materialised, and the younger brother had set his face against his older brother and she called him 'Bhanjia' out of contempt.

She could see Bhanjia's wife going across the open space in front of her house. She was plump and tall and was laden with gold ornaments which jingled and as she walked she held her head erect. Her poise, her lumbering gait, even her very appearance struck Pemi's Mother as insolent and repulsive. And now Ranga's Mother was calling aloud to Paluni's Mother, "I say, Paluni's Mother, you lazy bones, why don't you hurry up ? Aren't we going to cast our votes ?"

Pemi's Mother was consumed with hate as she looked at Ranga's Mother. She could not take her eyes off her. Here, before her stood a women who lacked nothing of the good things of life and lived happily with her husband and her children. Here were her two young children, both of them sons, romping about gaily around her. Her husband, Brajakishore had his flourishing business of selling timber; his timber depot was in the city where he had another house of his own. They had two grown-up sons, they lived with their father in the city and both had made a start in life by being employed as clerks in two offices. They had three daughters; all the three had been given away in marriage to promising youngmen. Their eldest daughter had married a businessman who took contracts for digging and piling earth and that had made him rich. Their two other daughters had been given in marriage to two well-paid officers, one an Inspector of Schools and the other, a Sub-Inspector of the Excise Department.

Pemi's Mother also recalled how Ranga's Mother lorded it over her husband; he was almost tied to her apron strings. It was she who directed his business for him and she even scrutinised the accounts of his trade. She lived with him in the city and had come down temporarily to the village because she wanted to add some rooms to their house, to buy more lands and to raise orchards.

As she concentrated her thoughts on Ranga's Mother, her jealousy and her spite were fed by more and more of recollections of daily incidents. She thought of the ungrateful world that forgot only too soon, all benefits that it received. Here on the same homestead lived four other families that were branches of the ancestral family to which her husband belonged. They had their houses separate from each other's. Paluni's Mother belonged to one such house, the family was poor and often in the past she had done it a good turn. Paluni's Mother had been one of her close associates all her life. But now she had changed over to the side of Ranga's Mother. Pemi's Mother recalled an incident which had taken place a month back before Ranga's Mother had come from the city. She could even remember the day of the week. It was a Tuesday night. She was called to the house of Paluni's Mother by her frantic cries for help. Her youngest child, a girl, lay helplessly in bed. The little girl was having severe fits of vomiting which spewed from her mouth and even from her nose, and suddenly, she threw her head to one side and lay inert. Pemi's Mother ran home and informed her husband and he cured the child in no time with only two doses of his 'Himipathy' medicine.

"Where was Ranga's Mother then?" She now thought sarcastically. She remembered, how after Ranga's Mother had arrived, Paluni's Mother, who had been a patient of amoebic dysentry, and had often taken medicines from her which she obtained for her from her husband instead took medicines from Ranga's Mother and what was more she had then cursed 'Himipathy' as a fake! And now she was spending all her time with Ranga's Mother, spying for her and carrying tales to her about other people.

"What a creature ! What a spineless changing !" Pemi's Mother thought in derison of Paluni's Mother, "To think that she too had a right to vote !"

Besides the families of Pemi's Mother, Ranga's Mother, and Paluni's Mother, three other families of common ancestry lived within the fenced enclosure. Two were of the divided uterine brothers, Gadeyi and Sadeyi and the third of Pari's Mother. Pemi's Mother recalled, how the last two had joined the following of Ranga's Mother and how Sadeyi had even offered to sell some of his lands to her.

"And these worthless creatures also have been given the right to vote ! What a shame !" Pemi's Mother thought bitterly as she heard, Ranga's Mother calling to them all to get ready.

There was only Gadeyi who was still on her side and she yearned to know from him for which party Ranga's Mother and her followers were going to vote so that she would vote for some other party. She was expecting him.

Gadeyi came to her and she felt relieved. He was a thin, bony man of less than medium height with a jet-black complexion and shiming bald head. His eyes were small and misty and were ofted turned to the ground.

"So you have come !" Pemi's Mother hailed him, "Now sit down. And let me get my *pan*-box to prepare a *pan* for you. Your brother is away. He has gone out to see a patient."

"I know that, sister-in-law, "Gadeyi said, "I saw him on his way to the Harijan quarters and he asked me to take you to the polling booth for voting. Now are you ready ?"

"Yes, but let me first fetch my pan-box. I won't take long", she went in to fetch her pan-box.

She admired Gadeyi for his will, his industry and his intelligence. She remembered, how in the face of heavy odds, he had not only been able to keep his head above water but had also prospered. When the controls on sales of essential commodities first came, he obtained a licence for selling sugar and kerosene and set up shop in the village. It had grown to be the biggest store there. It now fetched him a steady net income of two hundred rupees a month and had made him an important person in the locality so much so that the parties who had been canvassing for votes counted on his favour. What particularly pleased her was that he had outwitted her husband's younger brother, Bhanjakishore by his cunning and he could do nothing about it. He had borrowed two hundred rupees from Bhanjakishore who had been taken in by a promise that he would sell a piece of land to him. Gadeyi did nothing of the sort. He never repaid the loan and whenever asked, he would give an innocent reply, pleading, "Where have I the money to pay back your loan ? You are welcome to recover it by any means you may employ. I won't object." And that was the end of the matter. Bhanjakishore had not even obtained a receipt from him for the money lent and so he knew that a law-suit might be of no use. He bore him an ill-will, but Gadeyi was not afraid.

Pemi's Mother brought out her pan-box. As she began to prepare pan for Gadeyi and for herself, she shot a question at him.

"For which party are they going to vote ?"

"How should I know that, Sister-in-law ?"

"But that is most essential for us and you must find it out by any means. Surely, you and I are not going to vote for the same party for which Ranga's Mother and her group will vote ! If they vote for the symbol of the Palm Tree, we shall vote for the symbol of the Mango Tree. If they vote for the symbol of the Hen, we shall vote for the symbol of the Wild Cat."

"But what's all this ?" Gadeyi exclaimed in surpaise, "A palm Tree : A Mango Tree : A Hen : A Wild Cat : who put it into your head that there are such symbols for any party in this election ?"

"Never mind if there aren't. But we are not going to vote for the party of their choice. I would never !" And then she exploded, "Look at those wretches ! How long shall I tolerate this wicked audacity ! They know that your brother is simple and inoffensive and would rather suffer than retaliate and so they choose him as their target and rob him of his land. Hasn't Ranga's Mother already encroached on our house site and annexed a strip of four feet and a half out of it to her own in the new room that she is building ? They have no shame, so they parade their riches too ! How shocking ! What upstarts !"

Gadeyi did not look up. He smiled. "Is this battle of votes going to be a wrestling match between my two sisters-in-law ?" he meekly asked, "Then I can predict the result. You are no match for her. Ranga's Mother is a heavy-weight champion".

"A fig for your jokes", she chided him, "this is a serious matter. We must never vote for the side for which she votes. Never." She stopped abruptly for she saw that the labourer

women who had been engaged on the site of construction of the new rooms for the house of Ranga's Mother had stopped working and led by Gandhia ,who was a servant of Ranga's Mother who worked in her fields, were on their way to the polling booth. When they were in front of the house of Pemi's Mother, Gadeyi stopped them and asked, "You are off to the place of voting, aren't you ?"

"Yes", they replied.

"Which party have you decided to vote for ?" he asked.

"That is as our mistress has directed us", several voices replied. "And is not she our employer and our bread-giver ? How can we disobey her ?"

"But listen", Gadeyi argued,"It is not a matter of xpressing gratitude to an employer or obeying her. You are required to vote for the party which has struck you as the worthiest. Why cannot you decide that by yourself ? Surely, you can think of a party that did something to improve your lot. You are landless, you cultivate lands belonging to other people as share-croppers. Your share of the produce from a land was one fourth of the total, but one party made a law by which it was raised to three fourths of the total harvest. What do you think of that party ? Shouldn't at least you folks vote for it though the land-owner may not ?"

"Your arguments cannot enter our heads, Sir", one of them said, "we are simple folks. All that we know is that God does everything, whether it is good or evil. So, whenever anything happens, we bow to God. When the heavy floods come and sweep away everything before it, villages, animals and standing crops, we know that God has sent them. But

it is God again who sends relief for the flood-stricken, and rice and rice-flakes arrive in the flooded areas and are distributed. So, when by law, the share-croppers' share of produce from a land was increased to three fourths of the yield, we knew it was God's kindness. That, however, has no connection with this voting. Let us go. "Let us hear for which party you will vote." Gadeyi pleaded. "We won't disclose it", some voices answered blunty. "We have been told to keep it a secret" 'and as they moved again some one asked' "How does it concern you, Sir."

"How disgusting ! What insolence !"

Pemi's Mother exclaimed, "To think that even landless Harijan women laboures dare defy respectable Zemindars and agrue with them ! What are the times coming to !"

"That is as it should be in the age of Kali", Gadeyi replied.

The village school had been temporarily converted into a polling booth and the three contesting parties had set up their temporary camps a furlong away from the polling centre on three sides of it at three different places. One such camp had been set up east of the school under a big pipal tree near the quarter where washermen lived. In a Hindu village, it was the special prerogative of people of the washermen's caste to butcher goats for food for the villagers. Here in this village, that job used to be done under that pipal tree. Another party had been camping in the vacant housesite of Satura Kela, in the quarter where people of the 'Kela' caste lived. They were professional snake-charmers, and acrobats. The third party had put up its camp on the fringe of the village cremation ground. The camps were improvised flat-roofed huts of twigs and leaves. All the parties had brought their jeeps to the village for canvassing for votes and even in

the hot sun at noon, jeeps could be seen running about in surrounding villages, along narrow and winding alleys and mud roads pursued by swirl of dust. Two of the parties sent back their jeeps, but the party that had its camp on the edge of the cremation ground had its jeep in the village for the entire week preceding the date of polling. It grew popular with children irrespective of caste and class, they used to clamber into it and then to be taken on a joy ride from one end of the village here there was the Shiva Temple to the other end where there was the Hanuman Temple and then all round the village over and over again. The jeep scoured the meadows and ran along the village lanes, it was packed to bursting, and whenever it slowed down, several children hung from its tail-board while crowds of children ran behind it shouting. Many of them came from the quarters where milkmen and fishermen lived, and most of the villagers belonged to these two castes. The party that had its camp near cremation ground had more workers than the two other parties. It had complete outfit of what the villagers called a Singing Machine and which no other party had brought,—a big gramophone, microphones, loud-speakers, batteries and wires. When in action, the Singing Machine blared out songs and other music over the village and its cremation ground while wise and elderly villagers were heard praising the judgment and discretion of the party that owned it, for the reason that not only had they provided entertainment for to people who were alive but had also done so for the dead, there being a common belief that the spirits of the dead hovered over the cremation ground.

Pemi's Mother had formed a high opinion of that party and had a special reason for thinking highly of it. She had been

fond of a particular song since her childhood and was conversant with the typical tune with which it was to be sung. She found that the Singing Machine sang that song in that identical tune and so she was impressed. The song had been composed in the 18th Century A. D. by the famous Oriya poet Upendra Bhanja and it occured in his *Baideheesha Bilasa*, a poetical work which dealt with the story of the Ramayana. Each poem in that work had its own typical tune, each an item in the repertoire of tunes of the classical music of of Orissa. The poem which the Singing Machine sang and which impressed Pemi's Mother described to the grief of Surpanakha, Ravana's sister when she reached her native town Lanka, bleeding from her injuries on the nose and the ears and piteously weeping, because at the instance of Rama, his brother Lakshmana had cut off her nose and ears when he had offered her love to Rama in the forest.

The party that had its camp under the pipal tree where washermen used to slaughter goats for selling meat to the villagers had engaged a vocal singer to compete with the performance of the party with the Singing. Machine. That singer was bellowing out an exciting song describing the last battle of Ravana wi·h Rama, a battle that ended in Ravana's death. It was from the *Bichitra Ramayana*, a poetical work composed in the 18th Century by Biswanath Khuntia. In that composition, too, every poem had been set to a separate tune, the tunes so presented being some of the best samples of the classical music of Orissa. Few Oriya poets could match Upendra Bhanja in literary skill and in the musical contents of his lines and Biswanath Khuntia could hardly bear comparison with him, but he was more easily understood by all and sundry because of the simplicity of his language and his

poems, set to classical music and often sung, enjoyed a wide popularity.

A group of women listened to both the performances and attemped to judge on their comparative excellence. Pemi's Mother was one of them. They expressed the unanimous view that the deep bass voice of the singer coming from the goat-slaughtering yard under the pipal tree had strength and vitality and it deserved to be praised. It could travel far. It had such force that when it hit the boughs of trees overhead, the mud nests of white ants on those boughs scattered down on the ground. But, in their opi ion, the voice of the singer that could be heard from the Singing Machine, singing of the misery of Surpanakha was much more appealing. It conveyed such pathos that it could even stir emotion in the trees and in their branches; it could not drag down white ants' nests from the boughs, but it made the trees weep, as it were, and to shed their leaves.

The mind of Pemi's Mother had thus been finally made up in favour of the party that had the Singing Machine and she made her decision to cast her vote in its favour when she was jotted out by an incident. She saw Ranga's Mother leading a group of women towards the polling centre, behind her was Paluni's Mother while Jogi Padhan's daughter Tenteyi made up the rear. As the group went ahead, Tenteyi slowed down, came close to her and whispered, "It is the cremation ground folks they are going to vote for". Tenteyi moved on and Pemi's Mother gave a hard pinch to her companion Gadeyi on the arm with her finger nails. Gadeyi winced with pain and rubbed his arm where it hurt.

They were now in a crowd, people from all quarters of their villages had come to vote and people from neighbouring

villages were pouring in. Pemi's Mother drew Gadeyi aside and said in a low voice,

"Now I know who they are going to vote for."

Gadeyi kept silent.

"It is for that party."

He understood her when she said 'they' He knew she meant Ranga's Mother and those who followed her lead. But he could not understand which party she had referred to. But he did not care to ask her.

"Well, the choice is theirs", he said, "any one can vote for any body he likes".

She was not to be put off by what she considered, was an evasive reply.

"But you don't understand, Gadeyi", she pleadad, "since they will vote for that party we must vote for some other party. Let us vote for the party that has camped in the snake charmers' street. I have observed its members for some time and I am certain that it is the most deserving party of the three in the field. No matter if it has no jeep. It is a party of bright youngmen, unassuming and amiable who are quite at home with common people. They must be city-bred and educated youngmen from respectable families though they do not give themselves airs. Did not you notice how, upon their arrival in our village, they went to every home, sat in the dust on the outer verandahs of the houses and begged for the common rice gruel that poor people drink when they are hungry and thirsty? That has been their habit here during their stay in our village. It denotes that they look upon every common villager as their kith and kin. It does not matter if they do not possess a Singing Machine, in fact they are better musicians than any that the other parties have. They sing

excellently well. They are adepts in all the simple musical instruments that our villagers use, such as the *Khanjani*, the *Dhuduki* and the *Kendera*. It is wonderful how they tap on the back of upturned earthen pots and make fine music. You should hear them when they sing songs to villify their opponents, the two other parties. How their vituperations cascade down! And all in music too! What a command of words! What scathing satire! I am sure none can excel them in the art. So, that is final. Let us vote for their party."

Gadeyi felt outraged. "That would be sheer madness!" he told her. "Now, don't be crazy. You don't know those fellows. They are just a gang of disgraceful vagabonds. Let us not talk about them. We shall vote for the other party that is camping under the pipal tree. That is the best. And my brother told me to tell you that. Look! Here goes Kempa. And Kempa too is a voter! Hey! Kempa!"

Gadeyi called a deformed man with his mouth twisted to his right, his arms thin, his thin fore arms twisted at the elbow joints and his right leg shorter than the left, bent like a bow, who was hurridly limping away towards the polling booth, his arms swinging like flapping wings of a queer bird. His progress resembled a series of low jumps, when once his right leg took a step forward, the left drew up behind, straight and stiff, like a leaning pole. His name 'Kempa' meant that he was deformed from birth. He lived in that village and being a disabled man could not work for his living and was being maintained by his wife on her scanty earnings as a street peddler in the village, selling small quantities of salt and edible oils. Kempa did not appear to have heard that he had been called. He was wobbling forward as fast as his poor legs could carry him. Gadeyi shouted after him,

"Hey! Kempa! What's the matter with you? You are almost running! Stop, Kempa! Listen."

Kempa stopped and turned round facing him with an ugly grimace.

"Kempa! Kempa!" he cried in anger, "Calling to me from behind my back when I am out on a business! Don't you know that if you call out to a person from behind him when he is on his way somewhere it is an ill-omen for him and it portends that he will have no success? You did that on purpose, didn't you? Now who do you think you are and what is Kempa to you that you can harass him at your pleasure. Am I your servant? Do I have my hut in your backyard?"

"I did not mean to offend you, Kempa, why do you fly into a temper?"

"In a temper!" Kempa shrieked, echoing him: "As if you don't know what injury you have done! You called to me from behind me, so you have ruined all my chances of success, what worse could you have done? But I demand to know, why?"

Raghu Barik of that village came up. "Cool yourself, Kempa, and learn to behave properly with respectable people of the upper classes," he said. "Have you taken leave of your senses? Don't you know that he belongs to the family of our hereditary zemindars, our master's who owned the entire village? And fool that you are, you are storming at him on the public road! You should be ashamed of yourself. After all, what harm has he done to you? He called to you by your name and you start abusing him?"

Kempa put his short leg forward, dealt him a push and shouted, "Don't threaten me with the bogey of a master,

I have no master and I am a free man. If you think he is your master, go, lick his feet, eat from his cast off leaf-plates and be happy. Don't start a quarrel with me. I have nothing against you."

This was too much for Raghu Barik. Everybody knew that the deformed man was at times liable to sudden fits of anger without any rhyme or reason, and people did not take notice of that, but Raghu Barik could not control his anger.

"So you want something more than mere words, you fellow !" he shouted, "you want me to teach you a lesson ?"

"You bully, you strutting cock", Kempa cried, "Don't try to bully me ; none of your red eyes. I am not afraid of you. Get this into your fat head. Here in our free country, no body is too big for another person. A king has a single vote and so has a common tenant. Pandit Nehru has just one vote and so have I."

"So that is how it is !" Radhu Barik cried as he fell upon Kempa, forgetting in anger that he was deformed and handicapped, and as he pumelled him with slaps and first blows, cried, "Keep your vote to yourself. You should know that I too have my vote. And now take this. And this. And more."

Kempa fell down and howled. People rushed to him. They were from many villages. A woman whom nobody knew there and who had seen nothing of the incident went about wringing her hands and crying piteously : "The murderer ! The murderer ! He has killed the poor man ! God save us ! Now what am I to do ! Where am I to go !"

It dit not seem that she did not know where to go, she was moving steadily towards the polling booth. But her loud wails

had attracted the keepers of the peace. They were two Police Constables in khaki uniforms and red turbans, they rushed to the scene, the long bamboo sticks in their hands raised overhead to strike. They thought that at length there was a job for them to do. The crowd scattered and a group of women panicked and took to their heels.

Then a new situation developed for the supporters and the representatives of the three contesting parties at the election came up to the Policemen and accused them of scaring the voters away by show of force.

"Look here, both of you," they said, "We take serious notice of your high-handed action. You have created a panic among innocent voters by your unwarranted show of force. You raised your bamboo poles at them with a threatening gesture and innumerable voters fled for fear of you without casting their votes. This means heavy loss of votes for each of our parties. This is a very serious matter. We shall not let it drop, it will certainly be reported to the higher authorities. We protest. We demand justice."

"But don't you see, Sirs !" the Police Constables pleaded, "A breach of the peace was imminent and it would have happened if we had not intervened. What else are we here for ?"

"That is nonsense. It is you who caused a breach of the peace, nobody else did. This is the day of polling and here you are scaring away the voters !'

'Brothers ! Unite ! This is sheer injustice. This must be set right."

"Let us boycott the polls and go back.

"What a silly idea ! Turn tail and go back home ! No ! Come forward. Advance. Let us settle with them."

Various suggestions could be heard from different quarters in that motley crowd.

It was a big crowd, closely packed like the crowd that gathers on the occasion of the Dol Jatra festival when people from different villages assemble together in a field where the sacred images from their villages are brought in festive wooden pagodas. In the meanwhile, Kempa had got up and had quietly slunk away through the crowd towards the polling booth. He had entered the booth, cast his vote and had come out. He sucked at the inner surface of his left thumb which had been marked by a black dot in an indelible ink inside the polling booth so that he might not come in a second time to cast his vote fraudulantly. As he passed, people asked him, "For whom did you vote ?" "I voted for whomsoever I chose", Kempa went away muttering.

"That is my affair. I can cast my vote again after five years if I am alive then. Why should people ask me ? Don't they know the scriptures ?"

> "Whose food you eat,
> Sing his praises."

"Isn't that right ? Or, as they say, should you 'defecate on the leaf-plate that contains your meal ?' Now, who will give us our bread ? Who will take care of our well being ? Who will manage the affairs of our country most efficiently ? I have voted for the party that will do all that. It will surely win, you see." He aired his views freely but gave no names. He went away. The quarrel that had begun outside the polling booth had ended and the two keepers of the peace had discreetly gone back to the shadow under the mango tree in the distance without making any more fuss.

Pemi's Mother went forward towards the entrance to the polling booth. She looked round and saw the crowds. She saw men and women from different villages but their faces were unfamiliar to her and the same was nothing like what she had been used to in her daily life in her village. It looked strange and forbiding and she felt lost. Shopping stalls had come up. There was a loud buzz of human voices, people chatted together as they stood waiting to cast their votes, but she could not understand what they were talking. Her experience when she stood for a time listening to that chatter was just as it had been when the three contesting parties had held their meetings in the village separately and had delivered their election speeches. She had heard such words as Bharat, Pakistan, the Kashmir Problem, Boundary Dispute, demands, manifestos etc. But those words had conveyed no meaning to her and she had felt that she had never came across any of them in her daily life.

Gadeyi led her through the crowd to the entrance to the two barricaded pathways lined on either side with bamboo poles planted on the ground and fitted with cross-pieces of of bamboo. One of the pathways was meant for men and the other for women and both led to the entrance door of the village school. There were long queues in the pathways and there wes a big crowd around from which a din arose. The scene was unfamiliar to Pemi's Mother, most of the people in the crowd were strangers to her and she fell ill at ease in that situation. Gadeyi left her at the entrance to the barricaded passage that was meant for women and took leave of her. He told her : "You have simply to move forward with this queue and you will get into the polling booth where you will then cast your vote. There are officers inside

who will give you the ballot papers and tell you how to cast vote. There will be no difficulty. But don't forget what I told you before."

He was gone. She entered barricaded passage. A long queue of women was slowly moving in front of her and behind her came other women. To her right was the queue for men, more closely packed. The queues had to stand still at times for entry into the polling booth was being regulated by a guard standing at the entrance who received his orders from officers inside the room. Pemi's Mother saw a big crowd mostly of unfamiliar faces around her and felt lonely and ill-at-ease. She reminded herself what Gadeyi had instructed her at parting but in her confusion, she could not recollect which party he had asked her to vote for. Nor could she remember the advice given to her about the matter by her husband. She then realized that although at one time she formed a preference of her own for one of the three rival parties she could not recollect which party it was nor why she had made the decision. As she thought on the subject she realized that she knew nothing about any of the parties, far less about its aims and abilities, she knew nothing about politics and government, and all she knew was that a party in whose favour the maximum number of votes were cast would get the power to govern the country for a period of five years.

The queue had started moving. She felt that the moment was at hand when she would, in fact, cast her vote and yet she did not know in whose favour she would do so, she had made no decision and no knowledge nor information that would enable her to come to a decision. She felt more and more confused and her confusion bordered on panic.

Suddenly, she found herself inside the polling booth. That was a room in the village school from which the black-board, children's desks, and in fact all the furniture and the pictures had been removed. Some new furniture, other articles had been brought in and had been arranged in a particular order, and the room had a new look. To Pemi's Mother, it was an unfamiliar alien world. The faces were strange, even the air had a different smell.

She looked round the room.

Starting from near the door, there was a row of tables and chairs which had been placed not far from one of the walls. The row began with the seats of the polling agents of the three parties. Each party had one agent in the room. They were glancing through the printed lists of names placed on their tables and were ticking off the names of the voters when they approached two other officers sitting at a distance and the officers verified their names from the printed electoral rolls. As there was a crowd at the table of those two officers. Pemi's Mother waited for her turn and in the meanwhile, observed them more closely. One of them was unusually tall, thin and bony and had a beard. He was of fair complexion, but his thin, long face had an unhealthy pallor and looked ash coloured. He wore a white skull-cap embroidered with a floral design. He was dressed in a shirt and in trousers but his clothes seemed to be too loose and baggy for his thin, bony figure and appeard to hang from a bamboo frame. By contrast, his companion was thickset, almost fat and had a round face. He reminded her of Ranga's Mother. She thought with amusement how just and proper it would be if by some miracle a portion of his back could be taken off him and

added to the tall and lean man, to the mutual advantage of both of them.

She observed that when a voter came to their table, those two officers asked for his name and address which they would then look up in some printed lists which lay open before them. They would then ask the voter to move up to the next table. The officer sitting at that table looked his left thumb in order to see if it bore any mark and finding that it had none, gave him two ballot papers, one for casting his vote for the election of a candidate to the State Assembly and the other for election of another candidate to the Lok Sabha. That officer would then ask another officer, who sat near him, to put a dot mark on the inner surface of the left thumb of the voter with an indelible black ink and satisfy himself that such a mark was put. The voter was then given an ink-pad and a seal for stamping and it was explained to him how he should put a stamp with that seal on any paper. There was a cubicle inside the room made of cloth screens tightly drawn on all sides. The way to the cubicle used to be pointed out to the voter and he was told that he should go to that cubicle, get in, put a stamp on each of the two ballot papers against the name of the candidate for which he wanted to vote, fold each ballot paper and thrust it into the slit in the lid of the ballot box on which he would find the name and party symbol of his favourite candidate. Each voter was told that there were six candidates for the two seats, three from each contesting party and a separate ballot box had been allotted to each candidate and that the six boxes had been placed in a row on a table inside the screened enclosure.

After each voter came out of the cubicle, the stamping pad and the seal given to him were taken back from him and

he was then escorted to the exit door.

It was impressed from time to time on the voters that each voter should keep the names of the candidates and the parties for which he had voted or was going to vote, a secret from others.

There were other officers, waiting or moving round. There were some who sat quietly and looked grim. All the officers were dressed in trousers and shirts and some even had coats. Policemen in their khaki uniforms and red turbans moved up and down. Voters who were in the room were strangers to Pemi's Mother. Her feeling of strangeness continued. She found her environments to be formal, chilling and forbidding. She wished she were out of the room as soon as possible. She had been worrying herself so long as to how to decide in an instant which party she should vote for, and had not yet succeeded in coming to a decision, but that worry was relegated to the background by her feeling of lonliness, strangeness and incompataibility with her surroundings.

She found herself thinking then of Ranga's Mother, and her husband, Bhanjakishore, who was her husband s brother and was rich, not with anger and hatred as she used to do before, but with anguish because the families of the two brothers lived divided and separate from each o her. She sighed and thought how happy she would have been if the brothers had lived together in a joint family.

At that moment, she suddenly remembered the long mark of stitching in the end of her sari that lay on her head. A thought struck her that everyone present in that room had noticed that sewn seam of a long rent and that some must be staring at it even then. Her palm went out to it automati-

cally and she put it over the seam. She flushed with shame. An old lady who wore a gold nose-ring and had preceded her had already received her ballot papers, the stamping pad and the seal and gone to the screened enclosure. It was clearly the turn of Pemi's Mother to approach the two officers who were verifying the names of the voters present before them from the printed rolls and to announce her name. Two other women had come up behind her. But she was merely standing silently before the table of those officers, rooted to the spot, and confused.

Suddenly, the tall, lean, bearded man asked her in a deep voice, "Your name ?" He repeated the question in quick succession. "Yes, your name please, Madam ?"

She had no occasion before to appear before strangers, far less to be spoken to by any such person and she felt it disagreeable to her that she should be asked by that bearded stranger to reveal her name. She hung down her face, it burned with shame and at the same time, felt ashamed. She felt a resentment against her husband because he was not at her side in what she thought was a crucial moment in her life, she was in a terrible predicament. She tried to summon courage by reminding herself that she did not consider herself to be a coward and unlike some others whom she knew. she had never felt afraid while she had been all alone inside a temple. Her argument did not convince herself, she told herself that was because she knew all the time that the sacred Deity to whom she offered her prayers would never speak to her. She heard the question being repeated a third time by the bearded man.

"Your name, Madam ? Why don't you tell your name ?"

She could not fail to detect a note of impatience and vexation in his voice. At once, his companion, and the three agents of the contesting parties joined in with coaxing words, "Please, Madam, do kindly mention your name", they pleaded.

She looked at their faces, looked down again and began to think quickly. They wanted to hear her name, but she remembered sadly how no one had called her by her name for ages past, it had hardly been uttered and was as good as forgotten. It had been given to her on the twenty-first day of her birth by her parents and she had learnt what it was when she was a little, child Even then, she had never been called by her name in her parental home which she left on her marriage while still in the teens. Her father had affectionately called her by a nickname, "Kotari", which meant "a she-monkey" and that name had stuck to her all through her childhood and adolescence before her marriage. When she came to her father-in-law's house, her husband's parents and his elderly relations called her "Daughter-in-law"; his younger brothers, sisters and cousins called her "Sister-in-law". Not even her husband called her by her name though he could have done so without offending the social mores Instead, he used to address her as "Hi !", or "You there !" This continued until her eldest daughter was born and was given the name 'Pemi', and then her husband and everybody else called her 'Pemi's Mother'

She was thinking fast. They wanted her to tell them her name. Would she tell them that she had been known to all the world as Pemi's Mother ? Or, would she tell them all the other different words by which she had been addressed at different times in the past ? She rejected the idea, she felt

that the people at the tables did not want to hear those living names from her, they wanted to hear the name that had been given to her at her birth and that no one ever uttered a name that had served no useful purpose. She let them have it.

"Sharadha Sundari", she said. The lean, bearded officer at once started an assiduous search for that name through the pages of the bunch of printed lists on his table. Looking at him as he bent his head over the papers, Pemi's Mother was reminded of Chitragupta and his dossiers on the activities of all earthly beings. According to the Puranas, Chitragupta was a god who maintained a complete record about each living creature mentioning the date when it has scheduled to die, and every action done by it whether good or evil and that he supplied the information to Yama, the god of Death, who, on the expiry of its allotted spaon of life, led away that creature's soul in chains and meted out punishment to it, the nature and duration of such punishment varying according to its evil action while it was alive as recorded in Chitragupta's dossiers.

The Officer dabbed a finger at a particular entry and without looking up, said, "Yes, I have found your name. It is here. But it his Sharadha Manjari and not Sharadha Sundari. And your husband's name is Bhanja Kishore Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra".

The idea that any one could mistake her identity as that of Ranga's Mother and voice it in public that Bhanja who was her husband's younger brother was, in fact, her husband felt so atrocious to her that she choked with anger, her ears grew hot and tingled with shame, her face burned. It was taboo for a Hindu woman of her community to utter her husband's

name and she could not see anybody there of her acquaintance who would tell the officer what her husband's name was. Not being accustomed to speak before strangers she felt too shy to speak out and to explain to the officer what mistake she had committed. She was nodding her head vigorously from side to side as a mark of disapproval and of strong denial of his statement.

"So Bhanjakishore is not your husband !" the officer said in disbelief as he stared at the entry, "Strange ! However, let us see !" And while she boiled in anger, he turned over the pages of the list.

His companion was poring over another bunch of the lists. He tapped over an entry with the flat end of his pencil and nodded his face with an air of satisfaction. He raised his face, looked at her gravely and asked, "Perhaps your husband's name is Lakshman Malik. Isn't it ? It is recorded here."

That suggestion was even more atrocious. It was a grave outrage against her status and respectability.

Foul words of abuse uttered typically by women of the coun ryside and hurled at their opponents in a fight were directed mentally by her against that officer and the words rolled in a train inside her head. Without opening her lips she was cursing him within herself. "Accursed man !" She said within herself, "You must be the son of a wretch who was devoured by a snake ! May you soon die of cholera ! May your corpse be thrown into a pit ! May you be eaten by a goddess of the class known as the Yoginis ! She was trembling in rage, but she did not open her lips.

She event felt an urge to spit in his face in contempt and fury. But she did nothing of the sort. She was standing there

without a word and chewing a *pan* that she had tucked into her mouth. Among other ingredients that it contained, her *pan* was too strong and pungent for her to tolerate, and as she usually did on such occasions as a first act of safety, she spat out the partly chewed *pan* and the red saliva in her mouth on the floor of the school-room and in full sight of startled eyes. At once, she realized horror what she had done and instinctively. put one foot over the partly chewed *pan* and kept it concealed while she tried to obliterate the rest of the mess merely by rubbing on it with her other foot, but that only spread the foul matter over a wider area.

No body spoke. The city-bred gentlemen, looking at what she had done, maintained a stony silence. All the reproof that they intended for her was in their eyes.

Then the tall, lean man with a beard raised his trunk stiffly, and looking her full in the face, asked, "Is your husband's name Lakshman Malik ? What is your answer ?" Her eyes narrowed and trinkled. She thrust out her lower jaw, the jutting teeth in her upper jaw clattered again and again on the teeth in her lower jaw.

"Why should Lakshan Malik be my husband ?" she hissed at the bearded officer, "Why should not he be anybody else's husband ?"

"What do you mean ?"

"Why cannot Nakhan Malik be your mother's husband ?" she shrieked at him, "Nakhan Malik ! Bhanjakishore !"

"What's the matter with you ?" the officer asked politely, "Do tell me, auntie, my Mother's sister, what makes you angry ?".

"His Mother's sister indeed !" she cried, "Little do I

care to be his Mother's sister !" she turned her back on him and took two steps towards the entrance door, intending to leave the room, but some one stood in front of her ith arms outstretched, barred her way and pleaded with her.

"Kindly don't go away. Listen. Please a little. Now listen."

She twisted her face in utter contempt and exploded.

"How dare you block my way ? You cur ! Who do you think you are ? Have you taken leave of your senses ?" she looked at the entrance door and thundered in anger.

"Is there nobody there who can teach this impertinent fellow a lesson ? Come forward. Look at these fellows and she how they behave with us. They have the cheek to tell me that my husband is Bhanja Kishore or even Nakhan Malik ! What impudence ! What a shocking outrage ! How dare these fellows insult me publicly here ! Deal with them.

Who does not know that Bhanja Kishore is my husband's younger brother ? His wife is Rang's Mother, and she must be on her way to this place. Nakhan Malik is of the low, Kandara caste, he is a Harijan. He is a farm hand employed by Bhanja Kishore. And these foul wretches dare to suggest that Nakhan Malik is my husband ! Why did not their vile hearts burst when they harboured such an evil idea ? Now answer me, you fellows ! How dare you insult us for the reason that the Zemindari sytem has been abolished and our Zemindaries are gone ? We don't care if we do not cast our vote at all. Let us stay in our homes while you stay in yours and we wish to have no truck with you.

Here come Ranga's Mother and Paluni's Mother. Come here, both of you. It is of course taboo for Ranga's Mother to utter the name of her husband's elder brother, but Paluni's

Mother can tell you his name. Now, Paluni's Mother, tell them his name please!" She faced the officers proudly with defiant look.

Ranga's Mother and Paluni's Mother stood guard round her. The faces of both those ladies were flushed with anger. They were no more her enemies, they were her intimate friends.

A hubbub could be heard outside as more people wanted to come in. They wanted to know what was going on there.

The lean man with the beard stood up and folded his palms in a gesture of supplication.

"I beg you to forgive us, madam, if in any way we have hurt your feeli[illegible] Let me assure you, respected Lady, there was absolutely no intention on our part to give you any offence" In his agitation, his voice trembled and he broke into his native speech, which, though it was in colloquial Oriya, was spoken with an intonation peculiar to Urdu speaking people

He could sense an ugly situation. He addressed himself to Pemi's Mother but in fact, was making a public statement to anybody who could hear him. Though he wanted to look unperturbed and even chose his words with care, he slipped, in his mental agitation, into his native tongue. It was colloquial Oriya but was interspersed with several Urdu words and was spoken with a peculiar outlandish intonation.

"I appeal to your good sense, please set your mind at ease, Madam", he said, "I assure you, no offence was at any time meant to done to you by any of us here, and nothing of the sort has been done. Please don't misunderstand us. I don't know why you are upset, but whatever it is, forgive us. We are like your children, we give you the respect that our

mother deserves, and a mother is always forgiving. Let us recollec, respected lady, what is it that we did? We begged you to tell us your husband's name, you didn't, so we read from the printed lists two names of men given against names which were similar to yours and wanted your views. Perhaps we shoud not have taken all that trouble and should have told you that as you would not mention even your husband's name and your name could not therefore be verified from the electoral rolls, we could do nothing for you. But we were eager to help."

e sat down and mopped the sweat off his face with a kerchief and looked round. Peace seemed to have been restored. Even Pemi's Mother had come back and stood with her eyes on the ground. The officer addressed her again and while all eyes were on her, said. " nd now, a request to you Madam, please let me know your husband's name by any means you choose, but be quick. I cannot spend more time on a single voter, there are so many others, and our time is so very limited."

Pemi's Mother prodded at the back of Paluni's Mother with her finger and hissed, "Tell him!"

"Her husband's name is Braja Kishore Bhramarbar Ray Mahapattra."

"Yes",

Pemi's Mother and Ranga's Mother both said and nodded their heads. Both the officers then shuffled through the printed lists on the table and the bearded officer, after sometime, said "Here is the entry. Sharadha Sundari wife of Braja Kishore Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra"

The face of Pemi's Mother lit up with a proud smile which she at once suppressed. Then she heard that officer say,

'Here must be a Chowkidar in this village. Let him be called. Kindly wait just a little longer, Madam" Her face clouded.

The officer was cursing himself inwardly because it had never struck him before to send for the village Chowkidar. A village Chowkider was the night watchman of the village of which he was a resident. He kept in close touch with the people of the village and furnished any information about them to officers as was asked for. He used periodically to visit the Police Station which held jurisdiction over his village and to report births, deaths, epidemics, crimes and unusual happenings relating to his village to the Police. He rendered various forms of assistance to officers of the Government. In return for his services, he was given a nominal monthly salary and ownership of a land in his village. He belonged usually to the harijan caste, 'Kandara'.

Ganga Malik, Chowkidar of that village, did not take more than a minute to arrive. He had been hanging round outside as was his habit when something was going on in his village. A tall black white-headed old man, slightly bent, he still retained a muscular body, two rows of strong white teeth, his old 'uniform', that is a turban, a long shirt and a bag, all of a deep blue colour, and a stout-knotted and heavy bamboo stick, six feet tall that was itself the lowest piece of a very old and mature male bamboo of a thorny species. He announced himself, saluted the officers and waited for orders.

The bearded officer looked up at him, pointed with his finger at Pemi's Mother and asked him, "You see this respectable lady over there, Chowkidar, can you identify her ?"

The Chowkidar folded his palms and touched his forehead as he bowed to her and said, "Your Honour, she is the wife of the elder of the two Zemindar brothers of our village, and this other lady to her left," he bowed to Ranga's Mother with folded palms, "she is the wife of the younger brother. Their hereditary title is Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra, it was conferred on their ancestors by the King of Orissa and they were themselves like Kings at one time. Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra was at one time a name to conjure with. The door at the entrance to their house was made of bell-metal. Zemindaries are no more, their house has fallen, but who can forget them, sir ? We are their ancestral servants and dependents. I accompanied the marriage procession of the elder Zemindar when he went to marry this lady That was twentyfive years ago though it seems like yesterday. And what a brave and bloody fight we had with the brides relations and co-villagers as we entered their village. Thirty people were severely wounded, but it was a fight between the descendents of ancient warriors and nobody complained about it. The marriage took place peacefully and we brought her to our village with great pomp."

"But you have not yet told me here husband's name, Chowkidar !"

The old man looked bewildered. "He may be here any moment, Sir, he said, "His name is Braja Kishore Bhramarbar Ray Mahapatra".

"That will do. Thank you, Chowkidar. Now Madam, kindly hold up your left thumb before this officer at the table there and the little girl sitting near him will put a small round dot on it with an ink, it won't hurt, it will do you no harm and will vanish in two or three days."

Pemi's Mother moved to the next table. The little girl sitting a little apart sprang into action and put a round black mark on her thumb with a black liquid. It was an ugly mark, but she felt an exultation when it was put, it was as if that ugly mark was the emblem of a high status that was being conferred on her. She had also the same feeling when two ballot papers were handed over to her. She had the temporary illusion of documents confusing status, estates and power that had been drawn up in her favour and placed in her hands. Instructions about how to cast her votes were repeated to her, but she hardly needed those as she had heard those many a time while she had been in the room when other voters had received such instructions.

After she had heard the old Chowkidar speak to the officer about the glory of her husband's family, while it had been hereditary owners of a Zemindari estate, she had been transported in her imagination to those aristocratic and feudal times of the past.

But she had, in fact, never known those days. She had remained in the seclusion of the inner apartments of the house during the life time of her husband's parents. After they were dead she could look about and then she had not even seen plenty, even the old house was about collapse, and a small fragment of a former Zemindari remained for the family, and that too, more as a consolation for an injured ego, than as a substantial means of support.

But she had her fill of the legends of the past about the exalted family into which she had been married of which people talked.

Lingering at the last table in the row while she was being told how to cast her votes inside the screened cubicle, then

sauntering towards that cubicle with halting steps, taking a pause every now and then, she was absorbed in an illusion which she had herself conjured up and which made her swell with pride. In her illusion, she not just an ordinary housewife in a village, he was almost a princess, the eldest daugh'er-in-law of rich and powerful zemindar who was scion of an aristocratic family of which the lineage ran back to centuries past. Before her eyes, his house stood in all its spl ndour, invested with all the power, that she had heard it had once possessed, the power of which the strongest and richest in the land had stood in awe, and to whic! all that it wanted was immediately surrendered without a word in protest. In her imagination, she partook of all its power and glory, She identifi d herself with that ancient family and lived its times. Her world was peopled with two classes, the master and the servants, those who heard their praises being sung and those others who sang the praises, those who sweated in the fields, raised crops, harvested them and carried the harvest to the houses of the masters, and those others who lived on that produce but did no productive nor useful work and lived in luxury and comfort. Even the tall plinth of the house where the masters lived towered ten feet high over the open space in front of the entrance door to which the climb was up an inclined step of chiselled-out stones.

She imagined herself to be standing at the entrance door while Ganga Malik, the Chowkidar, stood below, a napkin round his neck, stooping down towards her feet from the waist with folded hands in an attitude of deep humility. She could gaze upon her bare back that was meant to withstand the heat of the sun, the rain and the cold. He stood before her in his bare feet which had been built so as to puddle mud and

water in the field in order to transplant paddy for his master, and his service, to tread on thorns or a glowing coal whichever was needed. In her imagination, he represented a class who existed only for her benefit and for the benefit of her class. She was experiencing euphoria. She felt a warmth for Ranga's Mother and Paluni's Mother ; not only had they stood by her side at her hour of dire need for which they had earned her gratitude, but in the strange mood she was in, she attached the paramount importance to one's social class and she accepted them as members of the same upper class as herself. As she proceeded towards the screened cubicle, she was reminded of how her ancestors, the feudal chieftains and nobles who owned Zemindari estates used to go out to participate in the ceremony of investiture of every new king and how every year, on an appointed day, in commemoration of the event, a mock rehearsal of the ceremony used to be held. A similar ceremony was also held in the house of every chieftain to commemorate his own investiture. She knew that no more were there kings and chieftains in the country, but there was a government all the same, and government meant power and a authority over other people which kings and chieftains had wielded before The importance of what she was going to do was, she thought, to assist in setting up such a government.

She felt exclusive in her status and in the realization of the importance of her mission, turned her face and looked proudly behind her into the room. What she saw left her speechless. A batch of women had just then entered the room and had lined up at the far end of the row of tables. At its head, clad in a spotlessly white sari, fresh from the laundry was her laundry woman Budhia's Mother. Next to her was her

daughter-in-law, Budhia's wife. She was a city-bred young girl with elegant tastes and she looked charming in the sari that she wore. It matched her beauty. Pemi's Mother could also see in that group Sodari's Mother, a woman of the 'untouchable' harijan 'Hadi' caste who were employed at times by the villagers as scavengers. She was dressed in a brand new sari, printed all over with a design of red flowers packed together. Her sari had not even been washed and it still bore the labels that the manufacturer had pasted to it. Sodari's Mother had oiled and combed her thick black hair which she had neatly parted in the middle of her scalp and had tied into a ball. Obviously, her hair had an excessive dose of oil, her head shone and a coat of oil that had drained down from her head covered her forehead.

"We want to cast our votes !", the women cried.

"You will all be attended to !" the verifying officer said.

Pemi's Mother was rooted to the spot as she looked at them. Her illusion of exclusiveness and superiority had been shattered. She was no more a member of the elite, the favoured, privileged ones, she was just anybody and everybody, equated even to a laundress or a scavenger woman.

The bearded officer saw her standing near the cubicle and whispered something to another officer who then hurreid to her and asked, "What is it you want, Madam ?"

"Nothing", she said dryly.

"Please get in and cast your vote as you wish and come out soon so that another voter may go in"

He uttered the words clearly so that others would hear him.

She went inside the cubicle that had been walled with curtains. She saw six ballot boxes in a row, each bearing the

name and the symbol of a particular candidate. She was illiterate, but she could locate the symbols where those had been printed on the two ballot papers. She was burning with hatred and she thirsted for revenge.

"Our people were not like this before", she was thinking, "They were meek and submissive, they knew their places. They never protested. Who were the people who changed their character and made them arrogant and defiant ? Who were the people who abolished the powers, privileges and preroga-tives that the aristocracy had enjoyed for generations ? The people who did that did no good."

She stamped each of the ballot papers with the seal that had been given to her, putting the impression against the symbol of particular party on each paper, folded the papers and thrust each into its respective ballot box. She went out of the cubicle, returned the seal and the stamping pad to the officer who had given it to her and was then led to the exit. Before she went out of the room she had seen Ranga's Mother enter the cubicle.

The crowd outside the polling booth had swelled, the noise was louder, more and more people could be seen coming from different villages and a helicopter was hovering over the scene, attracting attention and comments from the people below. But Pemi's Mother was feeling bored and tired. She walked away to a short distance where a mango tree provided shade over a wide patch of ground. She sat in the shade by the wayside, enjoying a slow breeze. Under the tree lay heaps of mango blossoms and tender mango fruits no bigger than grains which had all dried up and turned black. Across the path leading to the village and some way off ahead of her she could see the houses and gardens of people of the caste known as 'Padhan'

They did not belong to the aristocratic classes, they were hard-working cultivators, who had their own plots of land on which they toiled.

It could be seen at a glance that they were well-to-do people. Their houses had been strongly built and rested in repose under the shade of valuable fruit-trees. Near their houses were high hay-stacks, cattle-pens and wide pits into which cow-dung had been thrown for composting. The houses were surrounded by luxuriant orchards and green farms where they grew vegatables for the market. Long bamboos with buckets attached to their bottoms could be seen being dragged down into wells and moving up with their loads as those improvised lifts on dug wells worked, watering the vegetable gardens.

Pemi's Mother sighed again and again as she looked at those houses with envy.

"God has given them enough !" she thought.

As she sat there, Ranga's Mother and Paluni's Mother arrived from the scene of polling. Pemi's Mother felt happy when she saw them, she had the same feeling for them as she had experienced inside the pooling booth, a feeling of trust and intimacy because they belonged to her class and were in fact, her own. Ranga's Mother smiled happily and in a playful mood, asked, "Do tell me, for which of the groups did you vote, Elder Sister ?"

"Let me have one of your *pans* first, my dear," Pemi's Mother said, "How my mouth has been missing a *pan* for ages ?"

Ranga's Mother untied a knot in the folds of an end of her sari which she had tucked on her waist, and handed over a special *pan* case to Pemi's Mother.

"Help yourself of two *pans*, Elder Sister, or you may take more", she told Pemi's Mother.

Pemi's Mother thrust two *pans* into her mouth, grunted with pleasure and said, "You have saved my life with your *pans*, my dear".

Ranga's Mother smiled "For whom did you vote, Elder Sister ?" she asked again.

Pemi's, Mother told her, "But that is strictly confidential".